



# REFERENCE

31-3-76

## PREFACE

As each great writer moves to fame, his way is marked and its stages heralded by a succession of critical utterances. These become, as it were, rallying points and battle-cries of his partisans; discussion crystallises round them; they strike the key-notes for interpreters. Hence the importance, for the biographer and literary student, of histories of critical opinion.

THESE words, taken from an old review, might very well be allowed to stand as an 'apology' for the present volume. They give in happy and convincing phrase an excellent reason for such a work as that here attempted. The author's purpose has been to follow the career of a great figure in modern letters with some measure of critical detachment, that the result might be to disengage from the vast mass of contemporary criticism an even-tempered and well-considered estimate of the man and his work. Such an estimate should be at least as important as the personal opinion of any one critic, no matter how brilliant, and, in some ways, more valuable. But it is not for the writer to say whether he has succeeded in hitting the mark at which he has aimed.

Criticism represents fully one half of the work; yet my efforts to present for the first time in orderly narrative some slight account of Meredith's life and friendships may not, I trust, be considered ill-spent. Clearly, a 'life' of Meredith, in the proper sense of the word, is a matter for some one of his intimate friends or of his own family; a great undertaking and one to test severely the resources of whoever is called upon to achieve it. But what I have done has seemed to me well worth doing, for while I have strictly confined myself to quotation from and reference to already published matter, I have considered it better thus to present a survey of all that has been printed about George Meredith and his art, than to encroach upon the ground of the 'life' which must some day be written, by using any of the unpublished matter that has been offered to me or availing myself of ample opportunity to record many unpublished anecdotes. In a word, I have preferred to

attempt a work that would be 'complete' within the limits set, instead of producing a fragmentary biography by attempting something of a more ambitious character.

As it is, the present volume has involved not a little labour. It will be apparent to any intelligent reader. The research work, preliminary reading—in some cases the reading of a whole volume represented by a passing reference of a few lines—to say nothing of the writing, have occupied much of my scanty leisure during the last five years. One who had not examined the Merediths more than half-a-century would hardly credit what an immense amount of printed matter that represents. The constant difficulty in seeking to capture the spirit of this, was to keep the present work within the compass of a single volume. The hope of the present is that, to all Meredithians, it may prove a companionable and useful book, entering into competition with no existing work connected with the great novelist and poet, but filling a niche of its own.

To the many eminent authors from whom I have had occasion to quote some passage here or there, sometimes of the briefest again of considerable length, I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness. In every case where I have felt it desirable to quote somewhat more than the average proportion of text I have endeavoured to get into communication with the author and to request his or her permission—always, I need scarcely say, readily granted.

It remains only to add that the completed work had been delivered to the publisher the week before Mr. Meredith was taken with his last illness. In view of his death, it has been necessary to submit the whole to further revision, and certain interesting matters have been touched upon which had previously been ignored, when it was hoped that the present tense would still apply to most that had been written. Although I have now employed the sad tense, there is really no sadness in the passing of George Meredith, whose memory is still strong in his written word.

J. A.

*P.S.*—I add just a word to the above on the occasion of this revised edition. The reception of the work, as indicated by the remarkable cordiality of the reviews quoted elsewhere, is its ample justification. There were only two writers who subjected my book to ill-natured comment. I have nothing but gratitude to the exponents of harsh criticism, on whose advice I have made certain emendations.

31-3-16

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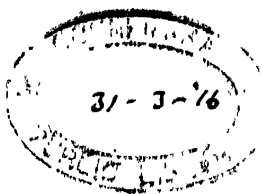
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[Phot. S. U.]

MURKIN'S BIKINI FACTORY HIGH STREET, PORTSMOUTH



# I

## OUTLINE OF LIFE AND WORK

1828-1873

SOMETHING of the author's aloofness to the personages of his fiction, which one feels in the novels of George Meredith, characterises also his relations with the tangible world down to the later years of his life. 'Far off, withdrawn' describes his relativeness to the living world of literature and affairs, certainly until his seventieth birthday is passed. In the later years of his life he seems to have warmed to the touch of his fellow-men in a way that his old-time austerity would never have led us to expect. Newspaper 'interviewers,' curious visitors, pilgrim parties were cordially received, where before one had as lief thought of arranging an interview with the Dalai Lama.

It is no part of my business here to account for this change of attitude, but it must be recorded, as his habit of strict and almost defiant seclusion, to all but his few intimates, extending over fifty years of his working life, has given rise to a mass of legend seldom equalled in the lifetime of an author. The remarkable outburst of newspaper comment which accompanied his eightieth birthday made the pages of the newspaper and periodical press to teem with the quaintest fables of his early life.

When a man has sought and won public distinction, under his own name, yet persists in wrapping the cloak of mystery around himself, that is little short of a challenge to public curiosity. A certain female writer of our time has gained—no doubt unintentionally—immense advertisement by this means. Advertisement was the last thought to enter the mind of George Meredith; of that we are all persuaded. But in a friendly age his long-maintained attitude of detachment from the life around him was bound to be mistaken by some for a pose, by others for a challenge, and, denied the facts, behold the fables of the newspaper writers! I am no apologist for these much-inventing scribes, but I understand them.

After all, no man has a right to make a public appeal who is not ready to face the consequences of having awakened interest in himself. A public writer should be publicly known within the limits of good taste, and all who pretend that the personality of an author is no one's business but his own are either ignorant or posturing critics. As Carlyle reminds us, the book is important, but 'the man behind the book' is important also. Is he a greater or a less personality than his book suggests? Is his book an honest expression of his individuality, or a performance bearing as much relationship to himself as an actor's part to the man discharging it? Does the book square with the man behind it? These are legitimate questions and all of high importance to the function of literary criticism. If an author pleads for purity and holiness and is himself a libertine, we ought to know him as he is. If another thunders for the strong arm and the thirsty sword and is himself a timid, emasculate, slipperèd thing of the fireside, it is highly important that we should see him undisguised. Men are more important than books, and the 'superior persons' who, in a not unnatural revolt against the worser side of the personal journalism of our age, affect to depise all consideration of an author's personality, must not be mistaken for critics of uncommon penetration.

On the other hand, we are all at liberty to tell just as much of our inner thoughts or our private affairs as we may care to disclose, and where memory awakens pain we may claim the privilege of sanctuary for these old grey years. Let us then be guiltless of any vulgar curtain-lifting in examining even the lives of those whose careers are full of interest to their fellow-men.

George Meredith has chosen to tell us very little of his own early days, and in the absence of exact knowledge we may profitably dismiss all the stories familiar to most of us who are in touch with the literary world of our time. This we know: he was born in Hampshire on February 12, 1828, of mixed Irish and Welsh parentage. I have heard him say to a gathering of admirers, 'If I had the eloquence of a true Irishman I should be making an impression now, but I am only half Irish—half Irish and half Welsh—I halt, therefore, rather on one leg. The Welsh are admirable singers, but bad dancers.'

The name Meredith, of course, is Welsh, and a writer in the *Manchester Guardian* has pointed out that it is invariably pronounced incorrectly by Englishmen. 'Nearly all Englishmen place the accent on the first syllable, whereas no Welshman would dream

of placing it anywhere but on the second, in accordance with the iron Welsh law that the accent must always be on the penultimate syllable. It would be interesting to know whether our greatest living novelist gives countenance to the popular mispronunciation of his name.'

I have never heard any of his intimates accentuate the name differently from the common rendering, and I suspect that the novelist, like a philosopher, had long ago accepted the English pronunciation. His case did not call for such self-sacrifice as many Scotsmen have had to bear in adapting their names to English tongues. The poet Mallet, whose name was Malloch, and the inventor Murdock, whose name was Murdoch, are good examples of what I mean.

Always proud of his Welsh origin, any appeal to him that had the support of Welsh sentiment never failed to awaken his sympathy. Thus in his eightieth year he became the honorary president of the Cymmrodorion Society, formed at the beginning of 1908, chiefly by professors of the Liverpool University, with the object of 'forwarding and promoting Welsh studies in the University by means of lectures and discussions.' And on the occasion of the St. David's Day banquet in London, March 2, 1908, the aged novelist wrote as follows to his compatriots:

It is one, among many regrets incident to advanced age, that I am unable to be with you. St. David is one of the great bonds holding Welshmen together, and they are of a more fervent blood than men of other races. To them there is no dead past. The far yesterday is quick at their hearts, however heartily they may live in the present. It is a matter for rejoicing, to see that Welshmen are in all walks of life making their energies more and more felt.

Meredith's fondness for Wales and the Welsh is frequently to be noted in his fiction, both in comment and in character. In 'Sandra Belloni,' for example, we have Merthyr and Georgena Powys, two very striking—if somewhat priggish—characters, where many are only partially realised and vague, and these two being Welsh have powers denied to others. 'All subtle feelings are discerned by Welsh eyes when untroubled by any mental agitation,' says their creator. 'Brother and sister were Welsh, and I may observe that there is human nature and Welsh nature.'

Yet his Welsh blood came to him through the connection he valued least—his father, a person of the tradesman class, whom he



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hardly knew, but certain of whose characteristics are embodied in 'The Great Mel.' His mother, an Irish lady of good family, died when George was about five. Though his father lived to an advanced age—lived indeed for many years after he was satirised in his son's novel—the usual relationship did not obtain between father and son. As a boy he was sent by his grandparents to the celebrated Moravian schools at Neuwied on the Rhine, about ten miles north-west of Koblenz, and the influence of the training he there received is very present in his work. 'Farina,' of course, is the first effort to use his Rhineland experience for the colouring of his fiction; but in his subsequent work the feeling of intimacy with German ideas and habits of life and thought is so noticeable that, without being told, it would be plain to the reader the author had early been brought into direct touch with German life.

Neuwied, however, did more for him than that. Whatever his relatives may have been in the matter of sectarian religion, the Moravians, to whose care the youth was committed for a time, are unsurpassed for their courageous devotion to their ideals of the Christian life and their liberal education of the young. The late Professor Henry Morley, who preceded Meredith by a few years as a Neuwieder, continued throughout his life to be intensely interested in his old school, and fifty-five years after he had left it he was editing a magazine which kept the scholars, old and new, of the various Moravian schools on the Continent and in England in touch with each other. Speaking at a gathering of 'old Neuwieders' in London, on January 17, 1889, he paid this beautiful tribute to the school where George Meredith had been educated: 'No formal process of education had acted upon their lives so thoroughly or so much for their good as the little time they had spent at Neuwied. It had taken all the bitterness out of their lives, all envy and hatred and uncharitableness having been so thoroughly removed from them by contact with the gentle spirit of the old Moravians.'

We may reasonably assume that Meredith's school-days at Neuwied represent a period of the utmost importance to his after life, and the scene of this early influence on one of the greatest figures in modern literature is worthy of some little notice, for one so observant and vigilant as Meredith must have been, even as a boy, could not have lived there long before he had absorbed the spirit of the place, and doubtless that passion for long walks and hill-climbing, which later characterised his days of lusty manhood.



NEUWIED ON THE RHINE AS IT WAS IN MEREDITH'S SCHOOL DAYS



first awoke among the historic heights along the right bank of the Rhine from Neuwied to the Drachenfels. The Moravian schools at Neuwied have long been famous throughout Europe, and many notable Englishmen have passed through them. Their origin dates from the time of Prince Alexander of Neuwied—the town was formerly the capital of a little principality—who was a shining example of liberalism in an age of bigotry, and who in 1762, during the religious unrest and intolerance of his time, made free of his little town to all the sects that cared for religion sufficiently to stand by their convictions. Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics, Moravians, Jews, were all allowed in Neuwied the fullest liberty of thought and worship; being, as an old writer quaintly puts it, ‘children of the same Parent, subjects of the same moral government, candidates alike for a future state, they are taught to reflect that the articles in which they agree are of infinitely greater importance than those on which they differ, and that the minutiae and speculative opinions cannot annihilate the primary duty of brotherly love.’ The partisans of each sect were allowed to maintain their own ministers and conform each according to their established convictions, without any form of interference from the state. A little religious Utopia! Out of this grew up the remarkable educational establishment of the Moravians, whence so many of the famous missionaries of that small but energetic body have gone out to the far places of the earth. Neuwied was happy in its princes, the little town was beautifully laid out, industries encouraged, and life must have flowed along there with melodious and purposeful rhythm for generations. When Meredith became a Neuwieder, the town had a population of about 5,000; but to-day it has considerably extended and contains some 11,000 inhabitants. It was the scene of Cæsar’s crossing of the Rhine and the district was rich in Roman antiquities, which the care of Prince Alexander first brought together in the museum of his palace, still one of the features of the place.

We may conclude that something of this spirit of liberalism, which must still have been electrical in the air of Neuwied in the earlier years of last century, entered into the young Meredith and conditioned the shaping of his mind.

After his return to England—he left Neuwied when not yet sixteen—he seems to have been engaged for a time on thoughts of a career in the law, the wish of his guardian, it is understood; but by twenty he was pursuing his study of the law with no very fixed notion of maintaining it to a conclusion. His mind was already

bent towards authorship, and his first poem, 'Chillianwallah,' appeared in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* of July 7, 1849. In this by no means remarkable piece of verse, which has never been reprinted, he celebrated the heroism of the British soldiers who, under Lord Gough, on 'the fatal field of Chillianwallah,' fought one of the most sanguinary battles of the second Sikh War, on January 13, 1849, the British losing 2,400 killed and wounded:

Chillianwallah, Chillianwallah !  
Where our brothers fought and bled !  
Oh, thy name is natural music,  
And a dirge above the dead !

Though we have not been defeated,  
Though we can't be overcome,  
Still whene'er thou art repeated  
I would fain that grief were dumb.

Although this poem is the earliest of his published writings which the bibliographers have been able to trace, some ten years ago a letter of his turned up, in which he mentioned that previous to the publication of 'Chillianwallah' he had published a paper on Kossuth. There seems to be some doubt, however, as to whether this paper was actually printed and, if so, whether it was before or after the poem, as it has been stated on the authority of Chambers's records that the editor of *Chambers's* had the essay on Kossuth in his hands about the time of the printing of the poem, though it was never published in that journal. This is a point that may be left to the elucidation of some future bibliographer more fortunate than Mr. John Lane, or Mr. A. J. K. Esdaile, whose painstaking work has already been of great advantage to students of Meredith, though incomplete and not free from error.

The year 1849 had not only seen the first small beginning of Meredith's literary work, presently to shape itself into a resolution for the literary life rather than for that of the law, but the same fateful year saw the opening of a tragic chapter in his personal history—a chapter which none but himself had any right to read, and if at all, can be written only by one of his own family, to whom the facts may be known. Perhaps it is better that the story of his first unhappy marriage should remain untold. Here, at least, nothing shall be set down concerning it that might give pain to any living person.

A young man of one-and-twenty, his career quite unsettled, his future a riddle unread, George Meredith in 1849 became the husband

of a young widow, Mary Ellen Nicholls, one of the daughters of Thomas Love Peacock, the poet-novelist and friend of Shelley. His own fiction is not without trace of influence from the satiric, intellectual wit of his father-in-law, and a feeling of literary kinship may possibly have had something to do in bringing about the match. Mrs. Meredith is described as 'a singularly brilliant and witty woman,' but happiness did not characterise their wedded life. There is the poignancy of a personal sorrow in some lines of 'Modern Love'; though in no sense else do I suggest that we may look into that wonderful revelation of 'tragic life' for any confession bearing upon the poet's own experience.

Mrs. Meredith lived through the years of her young husband's early attempts to establish himself as a man of letters; he wrote three of his masterpieces in her lifetime. The first two years of his married life were lean in literary achievement and, from the practical point of view, meant absolutely nothing by way of income to the young poet. He was merely an amateur of letters, in the experimental stage; three other short poems, in addition to 'Chillianwallah,' being the sum total of his contributions to *Fraser's Magazine* and the *Leader*, to the end of 1851. But in this year his first book of 'Poems,' a thin volume of 159 pages, including the incomparable 'Love in the Valley,' was published by John W. Parker and Son. He had made his first serious appeal for audience as a new writer. The book bore this dedication: 'To Thomas Love Peacock, Esq., this volume is dedicated with the profound admiration and affectionate respect of his son-in-law. Weybridge, May, 1851.' From this it may be judged that the cloud which later overshadowed the union of Peacock's daughter and George Meredith had not yet begun to lower. The Merediths were then in residence at Weybridge, within easy reach of Peacock's home at Lower Halliford. For forty years Peacock lived at that little riverside town, while Meredith was true to the sister county, the duration of his residence at Box Hill, Surrey, having rivalled that of his father-in-law at Lower Halliford, Middlesex.

The reception of 'Poems' was at least sufficiently warm to encourage the younger author to continue. The *Athenæum*, for instance, in a fairly prompt critique, over two columns in length, in the course of which the writer quoted approvingly and *in extenso* 'Will o' the Wisp' and 'The Death of Winter,' observed: 'Where the prentice hand is so manifest as in this little volume, we accept the signs of care and intention which it exhibits as indications of an artistic tendency in the "singer," and to a certain extent as pledges

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that one day he may become a poet.' Not a very penetrating judgment on a volume containing 'Love in the Valley,' but yet not unkindly.

If the poet had not made a hit, he was at least accepted as a writer of promise, as I shall endeavour to show in a later chapter of this work. Charles Kingsley and Mr. W. M. Rossetti were among those who reviewed his 'Poems' with very considerable enthusiasm, while Alfred Tennyson, who the year before had published 'In Memoriam' and succeeded Wordsworth as Poet-Laureate, wrote to compliment the young poet upon 'Love in the Valley,' saying he was so charmed with it that he went about the house reciting it to himself. Meredith's friend, Sir William Hardman, who recorded this interesting fact some forty-five years ago, blames him for having mislaid the letter, 'for it would be interesting and valuable in future times.' Certainly Meredith had a more encouraging reception for his 'Poems'—and not unnaturally—than Tennyson had for his early efforts, and whatever his feelings may have been, they could scarce be charged with disappointment, in view of what he wrote to Charles Ollier, the veteran publisher and novelist, who had the honour of being publisher to Keats and Shelley. Ollier had complimented him on his first book, and Meredith replied in these words:

It is the appreciation you give that makes Fame worth asking for; nor would I barter such communication for any amount of favourable journal criticism, however much it might forward the popularity and sale of the book. I prepared myself, when I published, to meet with injustice and slight, knowing that the little collection, or rather selection, in my volume was but the vanguard of a better work to come. . . . The poems are all the work of extreme youth, and, with some exceptions, of labour. They will not live, I think, but they will serve their purpose in making known my name to those who look with encouragement upon such earnest students of nature who are determined to persevere until they obtain the wisdom and inspiration and self-possession of the poet.

As the foregoing was penned before Kingsley's or Mr. Rossetti's reviews had appeared, the writer was evidently expecting no great warmth of welcome from the press, but he must have been persuaded before the end of the year that his first book, however inconsiderable its sale, had not been printed in vain. That he published it with any notion of making pecuniary profit is, of course, unthinkable; but as eleven years elapsed before he again offered a book of poetry to the world, the 'vanguard' of his 'better work'—assuming that



[From a print of the time when Mercator was writing 'Furina'.

THE DRACHENFELS.





to be in poetry—had presumably not achieved sufficient success for him to hasten up the main body of his forces; and, changing tactics meanwhile, he turned his thoughts to journalism and prose fiction. Yet the 'Poems' of 1851 may be said to have achieved all he had hoped for in the concluding sentence of his letter to Ollier.

Journalism, 'that grisette of Literature,' as Mr. Barrie has happily put it, so often the resource of those who must contrive to earn a livelihood by the pen ere they succeed in making their books financially profitable, was soon to offer George Meredith some material assistance while he persevered with the production of the literature by which he aimed to establish himself among the notable authors of his time. But we are quite without data as to a period of his life in which literary biography is usually full of interest. In the four years and a half that intervened between the appearance of his first book of poetry and 'Shagpat,' three poems—'Invitation to the Country,' *Fraser's*, August, 1851; a sonnet 'To Alexander Smith, Author of City Poems,' the *Leader*, December 20, 1851; and 'The Sweet o' the Year,' *Fraser's*, August, 1852—represent the sum total of his signed contributions to the periodicals. Not for eight years after the publication of 'Poems' do we find his name attached to verse or prose in the periodical press, until, in July, 1859, beginning his connection with *Once a Week*, he became a fairly regular contributor of poetry to the magazines and literary journals of the day. Thus from his twenty-third to his twenty-eighth year the history of George Meredith may be summed up: he published three short poems and wrote 'The Shaving of Shagpat'! We know that a son was born to him during this period. No more. His work as a journalist may have begun before the publication of 'Shagpat,' but we are without evidence. How he earned his livelihood, whether he needed to earn a livelihood, we are not told. We only know his emoluments from literature were practically nil.

'The Shaving of Shagpat' was published by Chapman and Hall at the end of 1855, though dated for 1856, and, among some dozen notices of the work which appeared in the press of the day, George Eliot, who earlier had made the personal acquaintance of the author, wrote two criticisms to which I purpose devoting further attention in the chapter on 'Early Appreciations.' The *Athenæum* gave a long review of two and a half columns to the book, as undistinguished as its critique of the 1851 volume, but distinctly encouraging. 'It is a work which exhibits power of imagination, ability in expression, and skill in construction.' This was almost enthusiasm from the

grudging old *Athenæum*! 'Shagpat' quite certainly did not immediately achieve great things for its author, and it is said that this first edition had a poor sale, a considerable part of it being eventually disposed of as a 'remainder.' It contained a short prefatory note, dated December 8, 1855, and as this is absent from subsequent editions, it is interesting enough to copy here :

It has seemed to me that the only way to tell an Arabian story was by imitating the style and manners of the Oriental storytellers. But such an attempt, whether successful or not, may read like a translation : I therefore think it better to prelude this Entertainment by an avowal that it springs from no Eastern source, and is in every respect an original work.

A second edition of 'The Shaving of Shagpat' was not attempted until ten years after the first, when the work was included in Chapman and Hall's 'Standard Editions of Popular Authors,' with the fine frontispiece engraved from the painting of 'Bhanavar the Beautiful' by the novelist's friend, Frederick Sandys. The third was printed in 1872, in the form of the two-shilling 'yellow-backs,' once so popular on railway bookstalls, but long since obsolete as the 'three-decker'—Hawley Smart was, I fancy, the novelist whose works sang the swan-song of the yellow-back. Both the second and third editions contained a preface so interesting as a winder to the dull faddists who cannot read a work of pure imagination without suspecting the author of some hidden didactic purpose, that it is a pity the author—perhaps with the feeling that any explanation to intelligent readers was superfluous—dropped it from all later issues of the book.

It is important to realise how remarkably Meredith comes among the great Victorians in the chronology of his work. We have heard him so often described as the last of the great figures that gave lustre to the mid-Victorian era, that we are apt to accept the statement without quite appreciating its full import.

Swinburne, a greater name in poetry than Meredith, came ten years later with his first book; Mr. Thomas Hardy, certainly as great, perhaps a greater novelist, came twenty years later with his first novel; so that neither began quite in 'the great days.' In the year preceding Meredith's 'Poems,' Dickens gave to the world 'David Copperfield,' Kingsley published 'Alton Locke,' Tennyson 'In Memoriam,' and Thackeray 'Pendennis.' How lean our literary harvests are now, when we think of five such masterpieces

issuing from the press in the same year! George Eliot had still to begin her splendid contributions to our national literature, Tennyson had still to write 'The Idylls of the King,' Thackeray had not yet written 'Esmond,' 'The Newcomes,' or 'The Virginians,' nor Browning his masterpiece, 'The Ring and the Book,' and Kingsley's 'Westward Ho!' had still to come. If we extended our survey beyond the limits of imaginative literature, such figures as Carlyle, Ruskin and Darwin would, of course, rise up; but confining the view to the great Victorian novelists and poets who were productive in the 'fifties' of last century the table which I have compiled and reproduce on the following page forms in itself no unimportant chapter in the history of George Meredith.

'There were giants in those days.' And the young poet-novelist found himself pitted against accepted writers in both prose and poetry. Is it any great wonder that he did not achieve immediate fame? The question of his difficulties of style does not yet present itself; that is altogether a later issue. A glance at the table overleaf will show the competition the young writer had to meet during his earlier years, and may induce us to modify our condemnation of the public of that day which is so often thoughtlessly blamed for its sheer neglect of his genius.

But, to return to the chronology of his work and the progress of his life, we have to note that his connection with journalism began somewhere about the time of the appearance of 'Shagpat.' Even here no precise dates are available. All that seems certain is that prior to 1856 or 1857 George Meredith was not a professional journalist or man of letters. He must have looked elsewhere for his livelihood. Whether circumstances may have altered and required his writing for a living, we are not told; but about the period mentioned he became editor of the *Ipswich Journal* and also correspondent of the *Morning Post*. By an odd twist of fate these two, the only papers he ever served, were both strongly Conservative, whereas Meredith was in his political opinions an advanced Radical. It is indeed difficult to account for his connection with the *Ipswich Journal* on any grounds but the need to earn a living. I do not recall any passage of his which would indicate that he considered the journalist might follow the example of the barrister and hire his pen to either side. Yet he was induced to write Tory 'leaders' and criticise the men he most admired in the public life of the time. I have read with some amusement of late not a few accounts of the novelist by professed admirers who sigh sadly at

| GEORGE MEREDITH   | ROBERT BROWNING  | CHARLES DICKENS  | GEORGE ELIOT   | CHARLES KINGSLEY   | ALFRED TENNYSON   | W. M. THACKERAY  |
|---|--|--|--|--|---|--|
| Poems, 1851   | Christmas Eve & Easter Day, 1850   | David Copperfield, 1850<br>Bleak House, 1853<br>Hard Times, 1854 | Trans. of Feuerbach's<br>Essence of Christianity, 1854<br>Scenes of Clerical Life, 1858<br>Adam Bede, 1859                       | Alton Locke, 1850<br>Hypatia, 1853<br>Westward Ho! 1855<br>Glaucois, 1855<br>Two Years Ago, 1857 | In Memoriam, 1850<br>Maud, 1855<br>Idylls of the King, 1859   | Pendennis, 1850<br>Esmond, 1852<br>The Newcomes, 1853<br>The Rose & the King, 1854<br>The Virginians, 1859 |
| The Shaving of Shagpat 1855<br>Farrina, 1857<br>Ordeal of Richard Feverel, 1859                             | Men and Women, 1855  | Little Dorrit, 1857<br>Tale of Two Cities 1859                   |  |  |   |  |
| Evan Harrington, 1861<br>Modern Love, 1862<br>Sandra Belloni, 1864<br>Rhoda Fleming, 1865<br>Vittoria, 1866 | Dramatis Personæ, 1864   | Great Expectations, 1861<br>Our Mutual Friend, 1865              | The Mill on the Floss, 1860<br>Silas Marner, 1861<br>Romola, 1862<br>Felix Holt, 1866<br>The Spanish Gypsy, 1868<br>Agatha, 1869 | Water Babies, 1863   | Enoch Arden, 1864<br><br>Holy Grail, 1869   | Lovel the Widower, 1860<br>The Adventures of Philip, 1862<br>Denis Duval, 1862<br>Roundabout Papers, 1862  |
| Adventures of Harry Richmond, 1871<br>Beauchamp's Career, 1875  | The Ring and the Book, 1869<br><br>Fine at the Fair, 1872<br>Red Cotton Nightcap Country, 1873<br>The Inn Album, 1875<br>Trans. of Agamemnon, 1877 | The Mystery of Edwin Drood, 1870                                 | Middlemarch, 1872<br>Jubal, 1874<br>Daniel Deronda 1876<br>Impressions of Theophrastus Such, 1879                                | At Last, 1870  | Gareth and Lynette, 1872<br>Queen Mary, 1875<br>Harold, 1876<br><br>The Lover's Tale, 1879                            |  |
| The Egoist, 1879  | Dramatic Idylls, 1879  |  |  |  |   |  |
| The Tragic Comedians, 1880  |  |  |  |  | The Promise of May, 1882<br>The Falcon, 1884<br>The Cup, 1884<br>Becket, 1884<br>Locksley Hall, 1886<br>Demeter, 1889 |  |
| Diana of the Crossways, 1885  |  |  |  |  |   |  |
| A Reading of Earth, 1888  | Asolando, 1889   |  |  |  |   |  |

Comparative Chronology of Meredith and six of his great contemporaries, from 1850 till 1889.

the thought that his writings in the *Ipswich Journal* are lost for ever and wish they but knew how these might be recovered. Those gentlemen have not been very wide awake, else they had read, so long ago as March, 1893, Mr. Frederick Dolman's contribution to the *New Review* on 'George Meredith as a Journalist.' Mr. Dolman, instead of sighing, took the pains to search the files of the *Journal* and to institute other researches which provide a contribution of some value to the record of Meredith's life. He was induced to take up the subject because it was rumoured at that time that Meredith was engaged upon a novel to be called 'The Journalist.'<sup>1</sup> Rumour was true to her reputation. If the novelist ever did contemplate such a theme, he would have had to rely more on his imagination than on any actual experience of journalism, for his own connection with the newspaper press was quite exceptional, save in the case of the *Morning Post*. 'The later fifties and the early sixties' is the period which Mr. Dolman, with unavoidable vagueness, assigns to Meredith's work in journalism. He was in journalism for 'seven or eight years.' Since we know that his most important experience was obtained as a war correspondent of the *Morning Post* during the Austro-Italian War of 1866, he evidently became an active journalist in 1858 or 1859, and ceased soon after 1866 what must have been to him distasteful task work. The fact that nothing could make him deviate from the ideals of his art in the books he toiled at during these years, while he placed his journalistic pen at the service of causes in which he had no measure of sympathy, admits of no interpretation other than I have given. And we must remember that in those struggling days he was fighting against burdens of debt, not of his own making.

'And you will not expect me to make money by my pen. Above all things I detest the writing for money. Fiction and verse appeal to a besotted public, that judges of the merit of the work by the standard of its taste—avaunt! And journalism for money is Egyptian bondage. No slavery is comparable to the chains of hired journalism. My pen is my fountain—the key of me; and I give myself, I do not sell. I write when I have matter in me and in the direction it presses for, otherwise not one word!'

The editorship of the *Ipswich Journal*—which we may attribute to some personal influence rather than to the usual process of a county newspaper proprietor advertising for an editor and selecting

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Henry Murray asserts with some show of authority that this novel was finished and put aside for posthumous publication; but the novelist's daughter stated after his death that he had left no finished work of any importance.

one from the many who apply—was held by Meredith under curious circumstances. He did not regularly see his paper to press; the routine of the office was unfamiliar to him. He did his work in his Surrey cottage and posted his 'copy' to Ipswich, where the editor *de facto* produced the paper. In short, he was only an editorial writer, his work consisting of one or two leading articles and an average of about two columns of news-notes each week: a sort of running commentary on the events of the week. Mr. Dolman has made a careful study of these editorial writings and extracted much of real interest to us. It is difficult to conceive George Meredith, the apostle of enlightened liberty, in the rôle of journalistic champion of the South during the American Civil War. Yet how characteristic is this comment on John Bright: 'Mr. Bright, *par exemple*, spoke at the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday. His speech contained the necessary "vindication" of the North. Mere blockade is perfect, wonderful, their greatness should inspire fear, and so forth. We dub him Yankee and bid him good-bye.' His editorial enthusiasm for the South was no doubt palatable to the readers of the *Ipswich Journal*—and he gave them good value for their money—but it must have cost the writer some qualms of conscience. Mr. Dolman considers that it may have been genuine enthusiasm in a wrong cause, but I am inclined to class it with the Tory sentiments which the *Journal* demanded of him if he had to eat its bread. For, having by fell circumstance been forced to the work, Meredith at least was no shirker, and he wrote for his paper just the best 'leaders' and the brightest 'notes' that a brilliant journalist could have written. The work was admirably done, and I shall venture to say that at no time in its existence was the *Ipswich Journal* better served. It is most interesting to observe in these ephemera of the press the true touches of what we have long known as the Meredithian style. The politics need engage us no further, but some examples of the humour and satire, gleaned by Mr. Dolman, are certainly worth reproducing, as for instance:

It is stated that the Padre Pantaleo, Garibaldi's fighting chaplain, is in the hands of a British Barnum, who has engaged him to recite the deeds of the hero, by him witnessed, before the day when, like Achilles, he was struck in the heel. This good Padre and most excellent fistic Friar has doubtless been tempted by a mighty sum to come over and make his chieftain small to us. Is it a sign, when the ghostly warrior consents to be farmed out by

a Barnum, that the fighting days of the adventurous leader are at an end, and that the Torch of Italy is to smoulder at Pisa?

In the following he pursues a fanciful analogy between the Franchise agitation and the celebration of Guy Fawkes' Day :

Here is reform coming before us once more with its semi-resuscitated figure, tottering on the shoulders of its lusty supporters. Who cares for it? Do the people shout? It is scarcely possible to picture a more melancholy sight than that presented by the late Reform Conference at Leeds. The veteran, Mr. George Wilson, comes before us with the usual array of figures . . . a letter of Mr. Bright's—a very encouraging and cheerful epistle from that genial reformer—was read. . . . And so Guy was patted on the back, and set up on his right side, and then on his left, and finally made a little blaze, and passed.

There is a fine sense of seriousness in his leading article dealing with the rumour that Lord Palmerston was about to be made a co-respondent in a divorce suit, and its closing words might be given as an example of the dignified treatment of a very delicate subject :

But rumour is a wicked old woman. Cannot something be done to stop her tongue? Surely one who is an octogenarian might be spared? We are a moral people, and it does not become us to have our Premier, agile though he be, banded about derisively like a feathered shuttlecock on the reckless battledore of scandal. For ourselves, hearing much, we have nevertheless been discreetly reserved, but now the veil is drawn by a portion of the press, and not so delicately but that the world is taught pretty plainly things concerning the Eternal Youth in office, and the fatal consequences of his toasts to the ladies, which may make some of them blush. We are indeed warned that nothing less than an injured husband has threatened and does really intend to lay an axe to the root of our Premier's extraordinary successes, in a certain awful court. We trust that rumour again lies, but that she is allowed to speak at all, and that men believe her and largely propagate her breathings, is a terrible comment on the sublime art of toasting the ladies as prosecuted by aged juveniles in office. It is a retribution worthy of Greek tragedy. We are determined to believe nothing before it is proved. It is better to belong to the laughed-at minority who decline to admit that the virtue has gone out of our Premier than to confirm a shameful scandal, the flourishing existence of which is sufficient for our moral.

One more quotation should be given, this time from an article on the Prince and Princess of Wales, the last sentence of which could have been written by no other journalist at that time :



Our ladies wish, they tell us, and we can more decidedly say that every man living who is not a milliner in spirit devoutly desires, that the Princess Alexandra will relieve them from servitude to the Crinoline Empress. The introduction of the crinoline has been in its effects morally worse than a *coup d'état*. It has sacrificed more lives; it has utterly destroyed more tempers; it has put an immense division between the sexes. It has obscured us, smothered us, stabbed us.

The period of Meredith's activity in journalism coincides with the publishing of 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' 'Evan Harrington,' 'Modern Love,' 'Sandra Belloni,' and 'Rhoda Fleming'; that is to say, from 1859 to 1866; the most productive years of his literary career and the most eventful of his life. One of the dearly-cherished fables concerning this period of Meredith's life was thus crystallised into a short paragraph by Mr. Henry Murray, the literary critic, in the course of an address to a London literary circle some years ago:

There is a legend current in literary circles that Mr. Meredith first started his career as a writer in the possession of one guinea. This he invested in a sack of oatmeal. Since he was too poor to buy fuel to cook it, during the whole of the time he wrote his first work, 'Evan Harrington,' he subsisted on oatmeal and water, in the form of a most unpalatable drink. Even when he had achieved great fame, he never received more than £400 for one of his novels.

It has been some little diversion to me to trace the travels of this paragraph through the newspaper biographies. The abhorred shears must have been busy at the snip when the paragraph first appeared. Journalists who had never read a book of his, but would gaily write you a paragraph or a column biography of the novelist, had all got this 'legend' among their clippings, and out it came on birthdays and on any other occasion when the name of Meredith was particularly before the public. Mr. Murray gave it as a 'legend'; but the newspaper writers have turned it into history. Of course, the slightest examination of the story is sufficient to expose its improbableness. When Meredith was writing 'Evan Harrington'—not his first but his fifth book—he was for the first time in his life making money out of journalism. During the year 1859 he was also a frequent contributor to *Once a Week*, his poems being illustrated there by the greatest artists of the day. His only long contribution in prose, 'A Story-Telling Party: being a Recital of Certain Miserable Days and Nights passed wherewith to warm

the Heart of the Christmas Season' (this is wrongly given in Mr. Esdaile's 'Bibliography') was founded on some stories told to him by Sir Francis C. Burnand. This contribution was signed 'T,' but is obviously by Meredith, who at this 'oatmeal and water' time was living in plain comfort in his cottage at Esher, and is spoken of by Sir Francis in his 'Records and Reminiscences' as 'then a rising star.' Nay, more, this starveling author of the cheap journalist's maudlin sentiment was able, *before* 'Evan Harrington' began appearing in *Once a Week*, to give young Burnand an introduction to the proprietors of that journal (who were also the owners of *Punch*), from which began Sir Francis's long association with Bradbury and Evans (later Bradbury, Agnew and Co.). The oatmeal and water fable may be dismissed, even at the loss of a picturesque passage.

That Meredith never received more than £400 for a novel is not at all unlikely and nothing to marvel at; but even this, so stated, is misleading, as most of his novels must have earned, from first to last, sums far in excess of the amount named, and in some cases well into four figures. A novel may be sold for £400 down on a royalty basis, and yet in ten or twenty years may earn for its author several times the original 'advance.'

Reverting to the chronology of Meredith's life and work, we have now to note that 'Farina; a Legend of Cologne,' was published by Smith, Elder and Co. in the autumn of 1857 and attracted considerable attention from the press, being reviewed by George Eliot in the *Westminster Review* of October; but as eight years elapsed before a second edition was included in the publishers' 'Shilling Series of Monthly Volumes of Standard Authors,' that may be sufficient indication of the limited commercial success attending the first publication. In 1859 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' which had been written while the author was staying at Halliford, was published by Chapman and Hall in the three-volume form. The second English edition, altered and condensed, did not appear until nineteen years later, being then issued by Kegan Paul in one volume. 'Evan Harrington' was published serially in *Once a Week*, from February 11 to October 13, 1860, admirably illustrated by Charles Keene, and bearing the sub-title, 'or, He would be a Gentleman.' A pirated edition was brought out in America towards the end of the same year, and in January of 1861 Bradbury and Evans issued the novel in three volumes. No early work of the same author received less attention from the

critical press. George Parsons Lathrop, the American writer, who was unreliable in his facts, though an able critic, stated that 'Feverel' (obviously an error for 'Evan Harrington') 'was drawing near the end of its publication as a serial in *Once a Week*, when the conductors of the English periodical made a bid for Hawthorne's "Marble Faun" (then lying finished in MS.) to succeed Meredith's tale. Hawthorne did not accept the offer; but this chance conjunction of the two works in time and place offers an interesting contrast. The romance of the American author, when published, rose to its due place in the monument of his fame which his own genius built for him. The Englishman's novel, published simultaneously, sank into obscurity.' Whether this is correct or not, as regards the conjunction, I cannot say; but there is no doubt that 'Evan Harrington' passed almost unnoticed, though in five years a second edition in one volume was called for. It is worthy of note that Mr. Tinsley, the publisher, who was well versed in the commercial side of books at that time, records that 'Evan Harrington' brought its author 'a fairly large sum of money.'

Here I have to notice a most curious error for which Mr. Arthur Symons, by some strange trick of his memory, usually so correct in its impressions, is evidently responsible. A good many years ago I read in Lathrop's study of Meredith, just quoted, the startling statement that 'his next novel, "Mary Bertrand," is not included in this latest and authoritative edition.' Was it possible, thought I, that it had been left for an American critic to point me to a forgotten novel of George Meredith's with which no Englishman that I knew seemed to be familiar? My efforts to secure a copy of 'Mary Bertrand' by George Meredith were unsuccessful. Later, I read Mr. Arthur Symons's critique of 'Evan Harrington' in *Time*, the magazine conducted by Edmund Yates from 1879 to 1883, and in the course of this I found Mr. Symons writing: "'Mary Bertrand," which should come between "Richard Feverel" and "Evan Harrington," is absent from the list; on what account I am at a loss to conceive.' As this article preceded Lathrop's by three years, it was doubtless the source of his information. Mr. Symons may long ago have discovered why 'Mary Bertrand' was not included. The reason, as I later found for myself, was an excellent one. That novel, published in 1860, was written by a lady named Mary Francis Chapman, whose *nom de guerre* was Francis Meredith! It is well to correct such errors as these, as no author of our time has been the

subject of more misstatements than George Meredith, for reasons which, perhaps, are sufficiently obvious.

In 1860 Mrs. Meredith died. For a great part of the twelve years of their married life she and her husband had lived separately. Meredith, now residing at Copsham Cottage, Esher, was thus a widower at thirty-two, with one son, Arthur, who had been born four years after the marriage, and his pride and affection for the lad are the subject of remark by the late Sir William Hardman, who had made the novelist's acquaintance at this time, forming a lasting friendship with him. Meredith was now entering the busiest period of his life. If not already 'reader' to Chapman and Hall, he had certainly acquired that position within a year of this time, on the resignation of John Forster, the friend and biographer of Dickens. He was 'editing' the *Ipswich Journal*, as we have seen, and had begun his connection, lasting for at least six years, with the *Morning Post*, to which he contributed a variety of articles on social and literary subjects. With Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Frederick A. Sandys, the artist, and other notable men, as we shall see later, he had also formed friendships, and towards the end of 1861 he entered into an arrangement with Rossetti to rent a sitting-room in his house at 16, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, intending to make use of this on his weekly visits to London in connection with his literary and journalistic pursuits. But the scheme does not seem to have worked very well, as he made but little use of Rossetti's house, though his sub-tenancy continued to the end of 1862 at least.

In the spring of that year his second book of poetry, 'Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads,' had been issued by Chapman and Hall, and dedicated to the poet's friend, the late Admiral Frederick Augustus Maxse, then a Captain R.N., whose remarkable personality was later to provide Meredith with so rich a study for 'Beauchamp's Career,' and one of whose sons, Mr. L. J. Maxse, is now editor of the *National Review*. The book made even less stir in the world of letters than its predecessor of 1851, and but for the attack upon it appearing in the *Spectator* of May 24, 1862, we should have to chronicle that, like the poet's novel of the previous year, it passed practically unnoticed. Mr. Swinburne's spirited defence of his friend, the author of 'Modern Love,' in his famous letter to the *Spectator*, did not even give the book a fillip, and no less than thirty years were to pass before parts of it were reprinted.

Despite his journalistic and literary engagements, and to some extent in consequence of these, Meredith contrived in those days to make occasional stays on the Continent: in France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Sir William Hardman has left us notes of a meeting between them at Paris in 1863 when Meredith was on the way to the Dauphiné. He was now engaged upon 'Emilia in England' (later, and not very happily, re-named 'Sandra Belloni'), which was issued in three volumes in the spring of 1864 by Chapman and Hall, no arrangement for a first serial issue having been made. The press gave the novel a little more attention than the two works immediately preceding it, but nothing, of course, in proportion to the importance of the book. Richard Garnett wrote a long and careful review of it in the *Reader*, a literary journal of that time.

But a matter of more moment in Meredith's life than the publication of another of his books is now to be chronicled, in his second marriage. The second Mrs. Meredith—whose charming portrait, done in chalk by Sandys in 1864, was an item of particular interest at the R. A. Winter Exhibition of 1905—a lady of French descent, named Vulliamy, was happily to prove a worthy companion of the poet-novelist, sympathising with him in every way and fulfilling the need of his strong and steadfast character for a large and satisfying love. An era of joyous, fruitful life now opened for him; the shadows that must hover about the ill-mated and the lonely heart were chased away in the light of this new domestic happiness, and bright children were soon to make Flint Cottage, Box Hill, a very idyll of rural life and happy, successful literary work.

'Rhoda Fleming' was the first novel written after his second marriage, and it also failed to find a serial opening—supposing that to have been sought—as it was published in the autumn of 1865 by Tinsley Brothers. Mr. William Tinsley tells us that it had 'a very poor sale.' The fact that its author was literary adviser to another firm, which would in the usual course have issued the novel, may suggest that Tinsley, who was personally acquainted with the novelist, made a bid for the book, and Chapman and Hall, not yet finding the works of their own 'reader' so profitable as others on their list, had acquiesced. Certainly the tragic tale of 'Rhoda Fleming' marked no advance in the literary fortunes of its author; but with the beginning of 1866 'Vittoria' made its appearance serially in the *Fortnightly Review*, with the editor of which, Mr. John Morley, Meredith was now on terms of intimate friendship. During this year, too, he undertook, as we have heard, the most

important commission in journalism he ever discharged, going out to the Austro-Italian War as correspondent for the *Morning Post*.

It has been stated many times in biographical sketches that it was while engaged in this enterprise Meredith secured his 'material' for 'Vittoria'; a difficult feat, forsooth, unless he wrote the novel from month to month, in Venice or elsewhere, as the story had begun in the *Fortnightly* before Italy struck her final blow against Austria by joining forces with Prussia, eventually to secure Venetia by the peace of the Prague. 'Emilia in England' was but the introduction to 'Vittoria,' as a picture of the Italian revolution of 1848, and when the splendid sequel was ready for the *Fortnightly* it had the great advantage of a strong topical interest, in dealing with the events of eighteen years earlier which were now culminating in the last struggle between Italy and Austria. The author, of course, must have made close acquaintance with Italian scenes before 1866.

I have made it my business to examine his letters to the *Morning Post*, and, to say truth, I cannot profess to have found his war correspondence unique or strongly individual. He did not see a great deal of the actual fighting, though he accompanied the Italian forces in some of their movements and marched and camped with them. Most of his reports are given at second-hand, vivid, gripping stories; but no better than many a war correspondent has done before and since. Written most likely in haste to catch the courier, they are remarkably direct in style of narrative and free from involutions of phrase, with only occasional faint echoes of the Meredithian manner. There is little, if anything, in them that is worthy of reprinting.

At the beginning of 1867, hot upon the closing of the serial issue, 'Vittoria' came out in three volumes, Chapman and Hall being the publishers; but its reception by press and public was in no way remarkable, the work not being reprinted for nineteen years. In a grudging notice of the novel on its appearance in the *Fortnightly*, the *Spectator* had spoken of its author as being 'hitherto known as a novelist of some ability and a rather low ethical tone.' In June, however, it was very sincerely praised in a study of 'Le Roman anglais contemporain,' which M. E. D. Forgues contributed to the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and this was one of the earliest, if not the first, of the references which were to herald the rising of his European reputation. In the same French review greatly abridged versions of 'Sandra Belloni' and 'Richard Feverel' had been published in 1864 and 1865, the former

being reprinted in book form in 1866. Of these and later evidences of Continental appreciation, I purpose treating at some length in another chapter.

The connection which he had thus established with the *Fortnightly* in 1866 was to continue for many years. Now shaken free of the *Ipswich Journal* drudgery, and not writing to any extent, I believe, for the *Morning Post*, he contributed many reviews and poems to the *Fortnightly*, which was to have the honour of publishing most of his later fiction. He was no longer unable to secure the great financial advantage of a first serial issue for any new novel, and as this evidence of substantial success dates from his thirty-eighth year we may consider that his days of struggle and stress were overpast at that comparatively early age, though he was still some little way from what we may regard as the great landmark of his literary life—the appearance of ‘Beauchamp’s Career.’

Towards the end of 1866, during the absence in America of Mr. John Morley, then editor of the *Fortnightly*, Meredith took charge of the review, and his ‘Sonnet to —,’ which appeared in the issue of June, 1866, as well as ‘Lines to a Friend Visiting America’ in the December number, were personal to Mr. Morley. Both these pieces appear in the complete edition of the poems published in 1898, where the blank in the inscription of the sonnet is filled in ‘J. M.’

The novelist had again become the father of a son, who had been christened William Maxse Meredith, his middle name in honour of the father’s staunch friend, who retired from the service with the rank of Admiral in 1867. The country habit of life was, if possible, growing upon him. Journalism being finally renounced for literature, his need to be in touch with the town might be thought less than ever; his membership of the Garrick Club merely a link to bind him loosely to the thundering metropolis; though, of course, he continued for upwards of thirty years to be reader to Chapman and Hall, an occupation that would call for regular visits to London. Yet he had good reason to remember the city and to go there whenever the mood took him, for it played a great part in his fiction. Oddly, in all the heaped-up criticism of Meredith there is no feature of his work that has been more neglected than this power of London over his imagination; this London in which he was at most no more than a regular visitor; never one of its myriad workers, swinging along in the surge of its daily life; but

more than any Londoner, better, a clear-sighted, penetrating observer. It has been left to a writer in the *Manchester Guardian* to touch, most happily, on this aspect of his work, which impinges so considerably on the character of the man and his life. 'More than any novelist save Thackeray,' says the writer in question, 'he pivots his novels in London.'

You do not find in him one-tenth of the painting of London canvases that you have in Dickens, nor one quarter of the wheels and springs of London life that you have in Disraeli. Yet neither of them has Meredith's absolute unconsciousness of any power-generator for life and action, if I may put it so, other than the bubbling of the pot of London—to use his own phrase. Wherever his characters may go, it is London and what their London will think that tweaks them into action—London that pricks Lord Fleetwood like a gadfly, London that sombres Lord Ormont, London that breaks Victor Radnor, London that fights for the hold upon Sandra Belloni, London that tilts the ground under the feet of Diana, London that drives Richmond Roy a-gallop. Other novelists have made deliberate excursions for characters moulded in the placid importance of the county town or the thoroughly anti-London sufficiency of the big manufacturing towns. But it would be hard to find a first-rank character in Meredith that you could see at home in any town but London.

That is the half-conscious, penetrating flavour. The taste can touch the palate more smartly. Take the passage to which the phrase about the London pot is a passing reference. 'London, say what we will of it, is after all the head of the British giant, and if not the liveliest in bubbles it is past competition the largest brothpot of brains anywhere simmering on the hob. . . . Its caked outside of grime, and the inward substance incessantly kicking the lid prankish, but never casting it off.' There are pictures of times of the day in London as classical as Hogarth's. The bluish red of Whitechapel under the north-easter; London Bridge at that particular hour before lunch when most of all the reflective man can savour there the might and majesty of the City gathered into 'London's unrivalled mezzotint'; late afternoon in the western Strand, with London's wild sunset clouds round the cocked hat of 'the most elevated of admirals' in Trafalgar Square; the night (how cunningly chosen!) in the little square of the newspaper world 'where the morrow is manufactured'; the morning walk in the Park in 'Feverel'—these are London possessions, and if Meredith called us also 'the Daniel Lambert of cities,' that is a possession too. Has any one so finely caught the Londoner's pleasure in the Embankment? 'The meeting near mid-winter of a soft warm wind along the Embankment, and dark Thames magnificently coronetted



over his grimy flow.' His London fog is perhaps best of all, although it does not offer a phrase, except, of course, the description of one gas-lamp as seen from another—'It was the painting of light rather than light.' But it was he, too, who said, 'This London is rather a thing for hospital operations than for poetical rhapsody, in aspect too streaked scarlet and pock-pitted under the most cumbrous jewelled tiaras.' In truth he has the genuine Londoner's half-brutal love of the place, and even in these later years, when he could no longer go about London with ease, he has not been able to keep away.

In September of 1870 'The Adventures of Harry Richmond' began to appear serially in the *Cornhill*, the romance being illustrated by George du Maurier. For fifteen months the story ran its course—where is the editor now that would accept a serial of more than twelve monthly instalments?—and in the winter of 1871 it was published in three volumes by Smith, Elder and Co. 'Harry Richmond' had rather more attention from the press than any of its author's previous works, though it did not reach a second edition for fourteen years. But the novelist, never swerving from his determination to give of his best, and in his own way, to literature, resolutely went forward without the slightest concession to public taste, showing no inclination to meet the patrons of the circulating library, however much he may have longed for a multitude of readers—and every man that writes would fain have audience of all who read. Of the success of the market-place he himself has said, 'we find we have pledged the better part of ourselves to clutch it, and the handful of our prize cannot redeem it.' Save for 'The Song of Theodolinda,' which doubtless puzzled many readers of the *Cornhill* in September, 1872, he published nothing more until 'Beauchamp's Career' began its sixteen months' course in the *Fortnightly* of August, 1874.

Thus we see him during the years that intervene between 'Harry Richmond' and this date, closely engaged upon the masterpiece which was to mark the turning-point of his literary fortunes. He has now, we must remember, though popular tradition would have it otherwise, long ceased to be an unsuccessful author. In these far-off days of the three-volume novel second editions were much less common than they are in our own day of single volumes. Apart from the fact that money was scarcer among the reading public, and that public vastly smaller, thirty shillings was somewhat more formidable a price for three volumes than six shillings for one! The libraries, of course, were almost the only purchasers; but a

single edition of a three-volume romance might be a good deal more profitable than five or six editions of our familiar 'six shilling' novel. Moreover, serials of fifteen or sixteen issues in the *Cornhill* and the *Fortnightly* must have been handsomely remunerated. Assuredly there is no longer occasion to be sentimental over Meredith's literary fortunes after 1870, and we have seen that ten years before that date journalism and literature together, though hard taskmasters both, were by no means barren of recompense to one who was giving them of his best. The return was disproportionate to the service, but the worker would have his own way—not his master's—and though his own way in the end came to be accepted, he suffered only as all self-willed or independent natures must suffer, until he had succeeded in proving that his way was worth having. It is said, but of this I have no proof, that 'Richard Feverel' and 'Rhoda Fleming' were even refused circulation by Mudie's on the ground of their indecency!

His reputation on the Continent had already made some little headway; in America, on the other hand, his name was scarcely known, and it is quite incorrect to credit American critics and readers with any exceptional acumen in awakening earlier than they of his own country to a due sense of his genius. The late Grant Allen, writing twenty years later of Meredith's position at this period of his life, in his *Fortnightly* essay on 'Our Noble Selves,' February 1887, observes:

Twenty years ago, George Meredith was by far the greatest artist of character and situation in the English language. But only a few appreciative critics at London clubs had yet taken the trouble to crack the hard nuts he set before them, and extract the rich kernel of epigram and wisdom; if the world at large begins to know him now-a-days it is because the few who could grasp his enigmatic meaning have preached faith in him with touching fidelity till at last the public, like the unjust judge, for their much importunity, consents to buy a popular edition of 'Beauchamp's Career' and 'Evan Harrington.' I don't of course mean to say that this deliberate booming was necessary in either case for the recognition of those two great men's real greatness, on the part of the few adapted by nature for duly recognising it. The critics of England would have found out Meredith, the philosophers of the world would have found out Spencer, even without the aid of an occasional laudatory newspaper allusion. But the 'blind and battling' mass around would never have found them out at all; and it is the blind and the battling that constitute society. As it has been possible thus to boom Herbert Spencer and George Meredith, so is it possible

perhaps to boom the hundred best living authors of whose very names the blind and battling are still for the most part contentedly ignorant.

Is all this strictly true? We see Meredith at forty-two the author of ten notable books: six very long novels, two shorter volumes of fiction, and two books of poetry. He has written a great deal of verse and some little criticism in the leading periodicals; he has had three of his longest novels published serially in the best magazines of his day; yet is he known only to 'a few appreciative critics at London clubs.' Doubtless it flattered these few some forty years ago to think so; but it was not strictly true. Even of conditions at the moment of his writing Grant Allen is not more accurate in his account; but we cannot blame him, as his purpose in the article quoted is purely exegetical and he must make his point even thus:

Unstinted praise of living authors, however deserved, is avoided with an almost Greek terror of Nemesis. I have heard dozens of people say in private—what is the obvious truth—that 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' is the greatest novel ever written in the English language. But I never saw anybody say so in print, and I know why: because 'Richard Feverel' still remains half unknown, and they are all afraid of getting laughed at by fools who can only appreciate high merit after it has received the final stamp of popular approbation in illustrated two-shilling paper covers.

This was written after Meredith's work had been the subject of the most enthusiastic praise from many writers of greater critical judgment than Grant Allen—James Thomson, W. E. Henley, Richard Garnett, Arthur Symonds, W. L. Courtney and others—at a time indeed when excessive and unmeasured laudation was the danger, and not undue reticence. And, by the way, was the statement that 'Richard Feverel' is the greatest novel in the English language not better suited for drawing-room gossip than for the cool deliberation of printed criticism? This, however, is somewhat apart from my present purpose.

We have now been able to follow the life-work of George Meredith, as closely as ascertainable facts have permitted, until he is engaged upon the writing of 'Beauchamp's Career,' and we find him then about forty-four years of age, settled in his unpretentious little cottage at the foot of Box Hill, Surrey, happy in his domestic life, the son of his second marriage a bright little fellow of five or six, and a daughter but recently arrived. The tide is

making for his greatest period of joyous and successful literary labour. Visits abroad, long tramps among the downs of his own homeland, increase of friends, the fireside haven of after-work, love and the glow of good health; all these now mark his days, and this period of tranquil delight is to continue for a good many years, and out of it shall come the ripest fruits of his genius.

## II

### OUTLINE OF LIFE AND WORK

1874-1909

'My dear boy, we read Meredith in the early seventies at Oxford,' the late York Powell once wrote to Professor Oliver Elton. Whatever the common public may have been applauding then, Meredith was by that time one of the prime favourites of the intellectuals: Grant Allen's 'few appreciative critics at London clubs' were mere flies on the wheel of the novelist's admiring and understanding public. He had made his way; he had his own public fast, and the flood-gates of the press were about to open before the greatest title of printed criticism that has signalised the work of any English author, since Dickens, in his own lifetime. Oxford was an early stronghold of Meredith's, and long continued staunch to him, as we may gather from this little personal reminiscence by Mr. F. T. Bettany, whose undergraduate days were about one decade later than those of York Powell:

We were all madly in love with George Meredith in my undergraduate days at Christ Church, and, thanks to the generosity of a friendly don who presented our Junior Common Room with complete sets of Thackeray, Dickens, Reade, and Meredith, we were able to gratify our enthusiasm. I remember well stealing from the shelves to which those books were to be confined the copy of 'The Egoist' and keeping it a week or more with scandalous selfishness in my own rooms. For us youngsters George Meredith was what Dickens had been to our seniors, and our joy in him was, I fear, just a little enhanced by his being—then, at least—caviare to the general.

'Beauchamp's Career' came out in the *Fortnightly* of August, 1874, and ran until December, 1875, the three-volume issue being published by Chapman and Hall immediately the serial was concluded, but bearing the date of the following year. A two-volume edition by Tauchnitz for Continental readers, in 1876, indicates the

widening of the novelist's public. Unless we are to suppose that the *Fortnightly* was wasting its space by printing the story, or that its circulation was of no consequence, we must always reckon the readers of that review as a considerable body in Meredith's following. The published criticism of the book exceeded in volume and appreciation that which had accompanied the issue of any of the author's earlier works.

Dating from this time, and covering a period of almost twenty years, follows the most fruitful epoch of Meredith's literary life, which may be said to close with the publication of 'The Amazing Marriage' in 1895, when he was sixty-seven years of age. According to himself, in creative art a man's best work is done by sixty-five. In his own case he had reached that age at the writing of 'The Amazing Marriage,' a novel that ranks among his best, and what followed from his pen bears out the soundness of his judgment.

After the launching of his first line of battleship in 1875, he set himself to a companion work of equal magnitude in the shape of 'The Egoist,' but in the meanwhile wrote the three shorter tales which, with 'Farina,' make up his collection of 'Short Stories.' Of course the term short story cannot be strictly applied to these; there is nothing more certain in criticism than the inability of Meredith to write a short story. The spirit, no less than the technique, of the *conte* is utterly foreign to his genius. 'The House on the Beach,' published in the *New Quarterly Magazine*, of January, 1877; 'The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper,' in the July number, and 'The Tale of Chloe,' exactly two years later in the same magazine, are all 'little novels.' His essay on 'The Idea of Comedy,' first given as a lecture—the only one he ever gave—at the London Institution, February 1, 1877, was also printed in the *New Quarterly* for April, 1877, while the revised and enlarged version of 'Love in the Valley' was contributed to *Macmillan's Magazine*, October, 1878, and the stately verses of 'The Nuptials of Attila' to the *New Quarterly*, January, 1879.

In the autumn of that year came forth 'The Egoist,' and behold a great stirring of dry bones! James Thomson ('B.V.') joyously throws up his cap at the long-delayed acclamation of the great novelist; the splendid critical sense of W. E. Henley is leading the movement for a wider recognition of the genius of George Meredith, and presently there is no author more discussed in the press than the writer of 'The Egoist.' This may be quoted against my pause in the story of his literary life at the writing of 'Beau-

champ's Career,' but while it is true that 'The Egoist' was the book that spread his fame abroad and extended vastly the horizon of his public, it is also true that the novel which immediately preceded it marked the opening of a new epoch in his history, especially from the point of view of contemporary criticism, which regards 'Beauchamp's Career' as the first work wherein the novelist reached the height of his power.

Grant Allen, himself a brilliant journeyman of letters, scarcely an artist, tells us that it was found possible to 'boom' Meredith. Surely this is not correct. The cant word implies a certain deliberate resolve on the part of some person or persons to push an author's personality and work upon the public. Nothing that I can detect in the course of Meredith's history justifies this. Henley was no 'boomster'; a saner, sounder, more even-handed critic never wrote. Not any single article of his on Meredith—and he wrote many—had the least suspicion of the gush of the log-roller. The volume of criticism, not always appreciative, that now began to pour forth from busy pens had no taint of log-rolling. 'Boom' is an unhappy word applied here. Meredith had merely, in the fullness of time and his own powers, awakened the attention he deserved. 'The Egoist' was first published in three volumes by Kegan Paul and Co., and a second edition in one volume was issued by the same firm within a year. It had not appeared in serial form, probably because he was already busy on 'The Tragic Comedians,' of which an abridged version was arranged for the *Fortnightly* from October, 1880, to February, 1881. That complete work appeared in two volumes in the winter of the latter year, and as evidence of growing popularity a two-shilling edition in Ward Lock's series of 'Select Authors' and a Tauchnitz edition came out in the same year.

In the early summer of 1883 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' was published by Macmillan and Co., marking an interlude in the work of the novelist, who had now turned his creative energy to the production of another long novel, 'Diana of the Crossways,' which was to prove perhaps the most popular of all his fictions so far as the taste of the general public is concerned. Little more than half of the story, the first twenty-six chapters, appeared serially in the *Fortnightly*, June to December, 1884, and the complete work in three volumes was issued at the beginning of 1885, 'Inscribed to Frederick Pollock.'

In the course of the same year an undertaking that illustrates far better than anything else the measure of popularity to which

Meredith had now attained as a writer of fiction—his poetry continued the delight of the very few for some years longer—was the beginning of the first collected edition of his novels in ten volumes. 'Diana' was added to this edition only a few months after its appearance in three volumes. Three others were published in 1885, five in 1886, and 'Shagpat' and 'Farina' together in one volume at the beginning of 1887.

But while 1885 was thus a year to be rubricated in his literary history, in his domestic story it was otherwise. In the autumn the shadow of death fell upon his simple home; he stood bereft of a loving and sympathetic wife. The second Mrs. Meredith died on September 17, 1885, and was buried in the churchyard close by Flint Cottage. Her husband's fine epitaph upon her is printed at the end of 'A Reading of Earth':

'Who call her Mother and who calls her Wife  
Look on her grave and see not Death but Life.'

For some little time after his great loss he seemed to be growing more of a recluse, the chalet near his cottage, against the fringe of the woods upon Box Hill, had become to him a little haven of meditation, work, and rest; monastic almost. There he pursued the thread of his quiet life, turning again to poetry, the results of which were soon to appear in 'Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life,' published by Macmillan in 1887, and 'A Reading of Earth' issued by the same house a year later. But he had now his vivacious young daughter of seventeen and his son of twenty-two to comfort him; the son of his first marriage, at this time some four-and-thirty years of age, being resident in Italy. Mrs. M. R. F. Gilman, one of the first Americans to advance his fame across the Atlantic, writing in the introduction to her excellent compilation, 'The Pilgrim's Scrip, or, Wit and Wisdom of George Meredith,' published by Roberts Bros. of Boston in 1888, remarks, under date September 1, 1888: 'For the sake of his daughter, of whom Mr. Meredith is devotedly fond, he is now trying to come out from his solitary retirement, and is occasionally present at social festivities. There is no dinner-table in the county where he is not a welcome and honoured guest.' Mrs. Gilman is usually so correct in her statements that one hesitates to doubt the inference of that last sentence. Certainly we cannot imagine any decent dinner-table, anywhere, at any time, at which George Meredith had not been welcome; but the picture of him as in any sort a 'diner out' is less easy to conjure up. His friendships



and home life, however, are left for further discussion in a late chapter.

In the year when Mrs. Gilman's book was published the novelist was a notable guest at a public dinner. This was the banquet to Parnell in May, 1888. Mr. Haldane sat on the left of the Irish leader, and next to him was Meredith, with Mr. Morley on his left. A sketch of this unique meeting of these three friends appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of May 10, from the pencil of 'F. C. G.'

One interesting item of personalia falls into place here. I have gleaned it from an article in the *Western Mail*, of Cardiff, for February 12, 1908:

It may not be generally known that some twenty years ago George Meredith paid an extended visit to South Wales, during which time he visited Llanelly, Merthyr, Llandilo, Cardiff, Tenby and Ferndale. At that time Mr. William Maxse Meredith, the son of the novelist, was in partnership with Mr. J. C. Howell, Llanelly the well-known electrical engineer. During his stay at Llanelly the distinguished novelist paid a visit to the South Wales Steel and Tin plate Works, then owned by Messrs. E. Morewood and Co. He was intensely interested in what he saw, and his description of the pyrotechnic display from the charging of the steel furnaces is still a vivid memory to Mr. Howell and the other members of the party. A few days later Mr. Meredith visited Ferndale, and while there he went down one of the pits owned by Mr. Fred Davis. The party included the daughter of the novelist and Mr. (now Sir) Frank Edwards, M.P. This was Mr. Meredith's first experience of the miner's life, and he sat down underground and enjoyed a long chat with some of the grimy colliers.

At Llandilo he spent a very enjoyable week, and was struck, as he could not help being, with the magnificent scenery of the Vale of Towy.

Another pleasant experience was the week at Tenby. A gentleman belonging to the party says he will never forget dining with the novelist on a Sunday evening at Tenby. Mr. Meredith was in brilliant form, and on that occasion his great conversational powers were heard at their best, and so absorbed were the party in this feast of reason and flow of soul that it was close on eleven o'clock before any one moved from the table. It was subsequent to this visit to South Wales that Meredith wrote 'One of Our Conquerors,' and a diligent student of Meredith discovered in that book the well-known Welsh expression, 'Ach y fi,' so that Meredith evidently took away something from South Wales!

We have seen that the first collected edition of the novels was begun in 1885 and completed in 1887. It is worthy of note that



MR. MEDD AT THE FARNELL COMMISSION

MR. MEDD'S STUDIES CHARACTER AT THE  
FARNELL COMMISSION



MR. MEDD AT THE FARNELL COMMISSION

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between these dates America awakened for the first time to George Meredith. Too often are we apt to credit our friends of the United States with 'discovering' our geniuses for us. As a rule they are quick and keen to claim the credit, and in the flood of writing which signalised Meredith's eightieth birthday the honour was not only frequently claimed, but weakly granted by English writers who knew no better. Meredith is not a parallel case with Carlyle, or, let us say, Philip James Bailey. I am happy to quote a distinguished American journalist and critic, Mr. William Morton Fullerton, now on the *Times* staff in Paris, in this connection. He contributed to Mr. Richard Le Gallienne's book about Meredith a chapter entitled 'Some Notes in regard to George Meredith in America,' and from this I excerpt a few passages of interest here :

I remember so well when the name of Meredith first became in America a name to conjure with ; and most clearly of all I remember the surprised awakening for some of us when we realised how long this man had been writing, and that we had known nothing of him.

Before the appearance of the first uniform American edition George Meredith was scarcely known at all in America. . . . For a long time even the great libraries were without a volume by Meredith, except, perhaps, a small, poorly-printed, Bowdlerised edition of 'Diana,' which did scarcely any service whatever in making him known in America. And then the first uniform one-volume edition appeared from Roberts Bros. in Boston, and the triumphal progress began.

Even then it was a long time, however, before George Meredith and 'Owen Meredith' were quite differentiated in the popular mind. . . . At the same time when this edition appeared I happened to be literary editor of the *Boston Advertiser*. The first volume of the series was 'Richard Feverel,' and it was upon this book that I chanced after a weary passage over a truly barren, unharvested sea of modern fiction. . . . I felt that I detected rare qualities of insight and a great and distinguished power of original expression. But the thing was, at that time, to say so.

Once at a dinner-party I found within me the temporary courage of my opinions. There were at the table several people of recognised authority as critics, who held the ears of many men. But venturing to say a little of what I thought about Meredith, I met with only an incredulous look, born of an utter ignorance of his work. One man, however, came round with a smile and grasped my hand. The incident was typical of the attitude of the public towards Meredith. Either there was utter ignorance or an enthusiasm equally dense and unworthy.

So that when it came to me to notice these books in the *Adver-*

tiser, in somewhat too eulogistic phrase, and I trespassed upon the editorial page instead of disporting myself within the parallel bars of my own more accustomed columns, a mild but waiting scepticism as to my sanity was the least offensive form of a feeling natural enough indeed, but which in its intensity took the shape of absolutely damning belief in my immature and untrained judgment. But the martyrdom was not painfully protracted. With chagrin I soon noticed that I was not to be allowed the selfish pleasure of clinging to an unpopular cause. I had kept the columns as full of allusions to Mr. Meredith, and of editorials upon him, as my editor-in-chief would endure; and as a result had called out a number of responses that kept, as the expression is, the ball rolling. In less than a year in Boston we all read Meredith, and Mr. Niles up there in the bay-window on Beacon Hill would have told you that he was contemplating a new and cheaper edition. Philadelphia, meanwhile, and New York had done themselves the honour of Mr. Meredith's company, and I hope with all my heart that Mr. Meredith had honest practical proof of it.

Touching the question of flattering Americans by letting them imagine they discover our great writers for us, even Mr. Fullerton might be thought to fall into an error when he goes on to say: 'Nothing ever written in America upon Mr. Meredith was so opportune or effective, I may say, as Miss Flora Shaw's article in the *Princeton Review*.' But is not this lady identical with Lady Lugard, who was then on the staff of the *Times*? Is she not Irish, and is it not probable that she wrote her most excellent study of Meredith on this side the Atlantic and sent it out to the *Princeton Review*? Of course, Mr. Fullerton's sentence may be read with that sense.

The collected edition to which Mr. Fullerton refers was, of course, an American impression of Chapman and Hall's first collected edition, and the cheaper edition was also issued jointly in England and America by the same publishers in 1889-90, 'One of Our Conquerors' and 'Lord Ormont and His Aminta' being added to it soon after they appeared in the three-volume form.

'One of Our Conquerors' had begun its appearance in the *Fortnightly* in 1890, when Mr. John Lane published Mr. Le Gallienne's brilliant study of Meredith's art. By that time the tide of Meredith appreciation was flowing strong and sure, though Mr. William Watson had a few months before delivered his memorable attack in the pages of the *National Review*, which periodical was later to come under the editorship of a son of Meredith's old friend, Admiral Maxse. The seriousness of those who were interesting themselves

in the study of Meredith may be gauged by the fact that Mr. Le Gallienne's 'George Meredith: Some Characteristics' passed through four editions in as many years, and a fifth and revised edition was issued in 1900. In 1891 came the late Miss Hannah Lynch's 'George Meredith: a Study,' and the tide of critical writing has since continued so steadily to rise that there is now some danger of the writings of the master himself being neglected for the writings of his expositors: 'the fate of the classics overtook him in his own lifetime,' may be the verdict of a later day.

It must be chronicled of 'One of Our Conquerors' that not only was this novel published serially in England and America—where it was given in the *New York Sun*—but that it also appeared as a serial in the *Australasian*. His compatriots of remotest Britain had at long last come into touch with him. Of course, colonial editions of several of his novels had already appeared, but the opening of the pages of the colonial press was a token that a public for his writings existed there. This was indeed late in the day; yet there is some excuse for Australia setting him to 'dine late,' and it is something to remember that the little brochure, 'George Meredith: Poet and Novelist,' by Mr. M. W. MacCallum, professor of Modern Literature at Sydney University, originally given as a lecture and published separately in the autumn of 1892, takes no mean place among the mass of criticism which Meredith's works have called forth.

In the winter of 1888 it was announced in the newspapers that the novelist was engaged upon a stage version of 'The Egoist.' It will be remembered that this was a time when the dramatised novel was coming into vogue. Many novelists had, like R. L. Stevenson, awakened suddenly to the fact that 'the stage is the gold mine'—though R. L. S. did not extract much gold from it—and busied themselves producing stage versions of their stories. Few, indeed, came to anything; yet every novelist still looks upon the stage as his El Dorado, and is open to face the trials of a Candide to arrive there. Whether Meredith ever seriously contemplated dramatising 'The Egoist' I have been unable to ascertain. What we do know is that the play was never produced, and in all likelihood it was never written, as there is little or no evidence in all the works of the great writer that he possessed any genius for dramatic composition. The art of the stage seems as utterly opposed to his slow, deliberate and penetrating method of characterisation as that of the scene-painter to the miniaturist. Instead of

essaying a stage-play in his sixtieth year Meredith, as we have seen, wrote 'One of Our Conquerors,' which appeared in the spring of 1892, in three volumes, and little more than a year later his sixth book of poetry, 'Poems: the Empty Purse,' etc., was published.

In the year 1892 the first of the few public honours ever conferred upon the novelist was announced, St. Andrew's University awarding him its honorary degree of LL.D.; and—a straw only, but indicating the way of the wind—it was in the same year that 'Meredith for the Multitude' had become a possible theme for a magazine writer, Mr. Le Gallienne contributing a paper on that subject to the *Novel Review*.

The novelist's only appearance in the witness-box—he had been a keen follower of the Parnell case, attending many of the sittings of the Commission in 1889—took place in December of 1891, in the matter of a libel action by an African merchant against an author who had written a story which Chapman and Hall had published. Meredith, in giving evidence, said that the story in dispute passed through his hands as reader for the publishers. Asked in cross-examination if he thought that the opening of the story relating to the hero's mother did not offend against the canons of good taste, the witness answered that it was the attempt of a writer of a serious mind to be humorous. It might almost be called a stereotype of that form of the element of humour. It was a failure, but still passed with the public. 'A kind of elephantine humour?' asked the judge. 'Quite so,' the witness answered. 'I did not like it, but one would have to object to so much.'

This little incident is not without interest as indicating that Meredith the novelist and Meredith the publisher's reader were fully alive to the need of keeping a sharp distinction between the class of fiction which the one cared to write himself and that from different pens which the other knew to be of the kind that 'passed with the public.'

Meanwhile, the novelist had in hand the last of his works to be issued in the old three-volume form, 'Lord Ormont and His Aminta,' which was published by Chapman and Hall in the summer of 1894—not yet had publishers decreed the summer months as a close time for book production. The book was 'gratefully inscribed to George Buckston Browne, surgeon.' An edition in one volume followed in the succeeding year, when a two-volume Tauchnitz edition was also published, and the novel has, of course, its place in the various collected editions of his works. No sooner could

'Lord Ormont' have been issued from the press than the author must have taken up, conscious of the fast ebbing years and diminishing vitality, the task of his last novel; for 'The Amazing Marriage' began its serial course in *Scribner's Magazine* of January, 1895, and was published in the winter of the same year by Constable and Co., in which firm the novelist's son, Mr. William Maxse Meredith, was now an active partner.

Thus ended forty years of novel-writing with singularly little evidence of failing powers, the same high reach of intellectual cheerfulness and artistic integrity. He was now beyond the limit of age at which, in his own estimation, a man can produce creative work calculated to rank with his best, and save for occasional excursions into the realm of poesy, his pen was now laid aside. The little chalet at Box Hill, where for so many years the good goose quill of the novelist had traced his thoughts by daylight and dusk and far into the solemn rural night, was losing its primal use as a workshop; with the 'seventies' looming over the white head of its occupant, it was becoming rather a little retreat for reflection and twilight ease. For, despite his remarkable vitality of middle life, at sixty-seven he had broken down in health and looked older and more worn than many men of eighty.

Certain work concerning his fiction was still to be done, and many could wish it had not been discharged. I refer to the revision of the novels for the splendid edition of his writings in thirty-two volumes published by Constable in 1896-98. The alterations which he chose to make at seven-and-sixty on a masterpiece he had written at thirty were drastic and much to be deplored. It is an old complaint this, many notable authors have been equally misguided, and there is no redress but to treasure the early editions. 'Richard Feverel' is a masterpiece which George Meredith *ætat* 67 was scarcely capable of writing, and it is a fair contention that he was equally unfitted to alter seriously the work of his dead self. The outlook of a man of thirty and that of the same man at sixty-seven must be so different on many vital points that they are in effect the outlooks of two different persons. Even allowing for a larger measure of consistent and enduring individuality in the character of George Meredith than is usual in most men, he could not have escaped entirely the common lot, and his overhauling of these early novels in his late years is to be regretted, as only less in degree than if some strange hand had done the work.

The success of the first collected edition and then of the 'New



Popular Edition,' in seventeen volumes, which began appearing in 1897, must have been gratifying to the novelist, if under the curling wave of seventy years he had any lingering wish to see his works in demand at the bookshops. Since that was a matter of indifference to him more than thirty years earlier—if we are to accept as autobiographical certain passages in 'Sandra Belloni'—it is probable that the success of these collected editions, as well as of the pocket edition of 1901–1905, was a source of greater gratification to his friends than to the veteran novelist himself.

Perhaps among the few official honours that came to Meredith he valued most that of President of the Society of Authors, to which he was elected on the death of Lord Tennyson in 1892. After all, the only people who can honour a great author are they who form the Republic of Letters, and the Society of Authors, representative, as it is both of the leaders and the rank and file, provides in its presidency the most distinguished position any author can be invited to occupy by the suffrages of his fellow-workers. There was not a moment's hesitation as to who should be asked to accept the office after Death had laid his hand on Tennyson.

Six years later Meredith attained his seventieth year and the occasion was marked by the presentation of a congratulatory address signed by a number of men and women of foremost distinction in the arts. The text and signatories are here given.

#### TO GEORGE MEREDITH

Some comrades in letters who have long valued your work send you a cordial greeting upon your 70th birthday.

You have attained the first rank in literature after many years of inadequate recognition. From first to last you have been true to yourself and have always aimed at the highest mark. We are rejoiced to know that merits once perceived by only a few are now appreciated by a wide and steadily growing circle. We wish you many years of life, during which you may continue to do good work, cheered by the consciousness of good work already achieved, and encouraged by the certainty of a hearty welcome from many sympathetic readers.

(Signed)

J. M. Barrie.  
Walter Besant.  
Augustine Birrell.  
James Bryce.  
Austin Dobson.  
Conan Doyle.

R. B. Haldane.  
Thomas Hardy.  
Frederic Harrison.  
"John Oliver Hobbes."  
Henry James.  
R. C. Jebb.

Edmund Gosse.  
W. E. H. Lecky.  
M. London.  
F. W. Maitland.  
Alice Meynell.  
John Morley.  
F. W. H. Myers.  
J. Payn.  
Frederick Pollock.

Andrew Lang.  
Anne Thackeray Ritchie.  
Henry Sidgwick.  
Leslie Stephen.  
Algernon Charles Swinburne.  
Mary A. Ward.  
G. F. Watts.  
Theodore Watts-Dunton.  
Wolseley.

Ten years later, in the midst of all the extraordinary attentions which his eightieth birthday evoked from press and public, it must have been with something of sorrow, mingled with thankfulness for the prolongation of his own quiet eventide of life, that the recipient of that warmly human and unaffected document—in this comparing favourably with the later address—noted that Death had taken toll of no less than eleven out of the thirty who signed the letter, his personal friend, Leslie Stephen, among them. In acknowledging the letter, Meredith had written :

The recognition that I have always worked honestly to my best, coming from the men and women of highest distinction, touches me deeply. Pray let it be known to them how much they encourage and support me.

Nearly twenty years ago a writer who was not without personal knowledge of the novelist said : ' His second wife lies buried in the churchyard close by his cottage, and he speaks with quiet content of soon going to rest beside her.' He had only said good-bye to the 'fifties' then, and he was to live into the 'eighties' through many years of serene and honoured leisure. Indeed he seems to have grown younger in spirit as he passed with failing steps through the later years of life, for we find him delivering himself thus to an 'interviewer' :

I suppose I should regard myself as growing old—I am seventy-four. But I do not feel to be growing old either in heart or mind. I still look on life with a young man's eye. I have always hoped I should not grow old as some do—with a palsied intellect, living backwards, regarding other people as anachronisms, because they themselves have lived on into other times, and left their sympathies behind them with their years.

Certainly those who saw him at seventy-four saw him as fresh-spirited as he had ever been, saving the unhappy affliction which had stricken his legs and made him, once so given to long walks and athletic exercise, a prisoner of the chair. In the summer of

that year—1902—he even volunteered an invitation to the members of the Whitefriars Club, a literary fraternity of which he had been elected an honorary member the year before, to pay him a visit at Box Hill, where in July 1900 the same literary group had sought and received the privilege of making a pilgrimage to the home of the master. His readiness to entertain such visitors as these—no mere curiosity-hunters, but genuine admirers of the man and artist—seems to have increased in inverse ratio as his strength diminished. Doubtless the feeling that work was done for ever, that the remaining years were a contented waiting for the call, and that, after all, there was some genuine pleasure to come thus into personal touch with men and women whom he had long before fascinated with his written word, threw open the door of Box Hill with a hearty *Salve!*

In the summer following he had a serious illness and many alarmist reports found their way into the papers, always ready to herald the passing of any great contemporary figure and not unwilling to work off their carefully-prepared biographies—already in type, perhaps! One of the morning papers—doubtless the same authority that assured its readers that the second Mrs. Meredith ‘lived only a few months after her marriage’—asserted that our illustrious countryman had ‘periods of partial consciousness,’ so critical was his condition. This drew from the invalid a telegram to the sober *Westminster*, so characteristic that it must be given here :

Dorking report of me incorrect; though why my name should be blown about, whether I am well or ill, I do not know. The difficulty with me is to obtain unconsciousness; but sleep, on the whole, comes fairly. I am going on well enough. This for friends who will have been distressed by the report.

His illness was certainly serious, but it is clear from this that the citadel of his mind was unassailed, as it had ever been, through all the assaults of illness on the body. Humour still dwelt there, and the characteristic phrases came unforced for the telegram, which is at once familiar and literary. Not many months later, his old friend Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton had the pleasure of addressing him in the following beautiful sonnet, printed in the *Saturday Review* on the occasion of his seventy-sixth birthday :

This time, dear friend—this time my birthday greeting  
Comes heavy of funeral tears—I think of you,  
And say, ‘Tis evening with him—that is true—  
But evening bright as noon, if faster fleeting;  
Still he is spared—while Spring and Winter, meeting,



*After the portrait by F. Watts, 1841*

*Painted by Holmyer*

GEORGE MERDITH



Clasp hands around the roots 'neath frozen dew—  
To see the 'Joy of Earth' break forth anew,  
And hear it on the hillside warbling, bleating'  
Love's remnant melts and melts; but, if our days  
Are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, still,  
Still Winter has a sun—a sun whose rays  
Can set the young lamb dancing on the hill,  
And set the daisy, in the woodland ways,  
Dreaming of her who brings the daffodil.

The allusion to 'funeral tears' arose from the recent death of Francis Hindes Groome, the famous gypsologist and intimate friend of the poet.

It was about this time that an old rumour as to his being engaged upon his autobiography was revived. There has never been any show of evidence for such a project, much though every admirer of the novelist would have welcomed an autobiographic work. It is likely enough that after seventy the mood of reminiscence had come upon him, but the strength had failed, and all that we have of original work from him in the thirteen years following 'The Amazing Marriage,' save an occasional poem, are 'Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History' and 'A Reading of Life.'

In July 1905 he was appointed by King Edward to the Order of Merit, a distinction which had the whole-hearted approval of the entire literary world, recognising in this a worthier official cachet than the common bourgeoisie baronetcy or knighthood. In the October following, the aged novelist met with a serious accident in a very simple way. He was being assisted by his manservant to a chair in his sitting-room when he slipped and broke two bones of his left leg. It was discovered, happily, that the fracture was a simple and not a compound one, and this, together with the calmness and cheerfulness of the patient, whose spirits never drooped under the pain of the fracture or the restraint of the mending, promised a speedy recovery. In consequence of the accident, however—though it is doubtful if he could have gone in any case—he was unable to attend the King's Investiture at Buckingham Palace, so the Registrar and Secretary of the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood proceeded to Leatherhead, by his Majesty's commands, and conveyed to the illustrious prisoner of Box Hill the insignia and Warrant of the Order of Merit.

By Christmas, although not entirely free from the result of his accident, he was about again in his bath-chair making his old familiar journeys along the friendly roads about the hill. The press had now come to take so keen an interest in the patriarch of

English letters that his every movement and utterance had been for some time recorded with the detail which is usually reserved for the Prime Minister or a noted murderer or bigamist. It is odd, for instance, to find the *Daily Mail* growing lyrical, after this fashion, of George Meredith's Christmas Day, 1905 :

Bathed in delightful sunshine and favoured with a beautifully mild and clear atmosphere, the neighbourhood of Box Hill yesterday resembled a Riviera resort.

It was doubtless these spring-like conditions that tempted Mr. George Meredith, only just convalescent from his broken leg, to spend over an hour of his Christmas in the famous fir-bordered lane which climbs a tortuous way from the Mickleham Road to the summit of the hill. Warmly clad in a rich fur-lined overcoat and a grey cap, the veteran novelist was gently wheeled by feminine hands in an extended bath-chair, and his face betokened joy at being abroad in his sacred Surrey.

'In such a matchless morning both my man and my donkey are spending their Christmas out of harness,' he explained genially to a *Daily Mail* correspondent, who inquired after his welfare, 'and so, perforce, I had to be wheeled.' As to his general condition the eminent novelist mentioned that during the past few days he had found sleep an unwilling guest. This fact was chiefly due to his injured limb, which had mended less rapidly than was expected, and which still gave him considerable pain, especially at night.

As he himself pointed out, Mr. Meredith will be seventy-eight next year, and the effects of a serious accident at his time of life cannot be easily shaken off. 'But I am glad to be out of doors this Christmas,' he added, drawing himself up in his travelling chair to view the Surrey landscape. 'I should have been sorry to miss a day like this.'

Mr. Meredith continues to take a keen interest in outside affairs, such as the tragic events in Russia and the forthcoming general election.

The last paragraph touches a feature of Meredith's later years that is noteworthy. There was no public question, national or international, engaging the mind of the country, but George Meredith was asked to express his opinion upon it. An episode of the Boer War, the future of Liberalism, the Marriage Question, Anglo-French relationships, the decadence of Athletics, any topic of the day that gave an interviewer an excuse for a run down to Box Hill and a knock at the door of Flint Cottage, and behold the results next morning in a prominent part of his paper. The literary recluse had in his old age become a sort of intellectual umpire to whom both sides applied for counsel, though he did not hesitate to label himself

Radical. The very multiplicity and magnitude of many of the interests which had stirred the public in his later years, to say nothing of the splendid issues of his middle life, leave one wondering how he could ever have so misjudged his age as when, with evident approval, he makes Adrian in 'Richard Feverel' quote Diaper Sandoe, beginning :

'An Age of petty tit for tat,  
An Age of busy gabble :  
An Age that's like a brewer's vat,  
Fermenting for the rabble !'

and ending :

'From this unrest, lo, early wreck'd,  
A Future staggers crazy,  
Ophelia of the Ages, deck'd  
With woeful weed and daisy !'

These verses he wrote in the full tide of his lusty manhood, when he was something of a rebel to his age; but from many utterances of his later years he had unmistakably come to the conclusion that his own age compared well with any that had preceded it, not merely in its magnificent issues, but in its wide and broadening humanism. It is indeed difficult to think that he ever, save for some passing moment, thought of his own time as an age of petty tit for tat, when none was more profoundly interested than he in the great events of European History, to say nothing of the American Civil War, and the freeing of Italy, which last has been so grandly celebrated by him in one of his masterpieces of fiction. Indeed, among the very latest efforts of his pen, written in his eightieth year, were the verses 'For the Centenary of Garibaldi,' appearing exactly forty years after his 'Vittoria.' Thus his latest note is in praise of liberty and also in praise of nature—the two passions of his life—for to the issue of the *Country House*, July 1908, a periodical published by his son's firm, one of the latest products of his pen, a characteristic nature poem, was contributed. For the Milton tercentenary in December of the same year he also wrote some noble lines, still holding aloft the banner of Liberty.

His eightieth birthday was an event of such historic importance that I purpose dealing with it at some length in the next chapter of this work. He was spared to see another birthday, and though he held to life by the merest thread, his mind remained as vigorous as of yore. A chill contracted at the end of the second week in May proved too much for his enfeebled frame, and in the early



hours of Tuesday, May 18, 1909, he died of heart failure. He was practically conscious to the last: he had not 'died 'from the head downwards.' He 'died facing the dawn and his end came in perfect peace,' says one newspaper account. 'He welcomed death as serenely as he had encountered life, and met the end with calm courage.' The decision of the Dean and Chapter against his interment in Westminster was generally regretted and not a little resented, though, truly, George Meredith has left so great a monument of his own creation that the Abbey may be left for the enshrining of lesser men. His remains were cremated at Woking and the ashes were interred at Dorking on Saturday, May 22, the funeral being strictly private. On the same day a memorial service was held in Westminster Abbey.

Having now outlined the leading features of a long and noble life spent in single devotion to great literature, and for that reason lacking in event and movement, the present chapter may be concluded with some words of Meredith's own, in which the aim of his literary life is briefly stated. The passage occurs in a letter to a contributor to the *Harvard Monthly*, who some years ago wrote in that review a study of the novelist which gave him pleasure. Meredith wrote:

When at the conclusion of your article on my works you say that a certain change in public taste, should it come about, will be to some extent due to me, you hand me the flowering wreath I covet. For I think that all right use of life and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us; and as to my works I know them faulty, think them of worth only where they point and aid to that end.

In a note on his eightieth birthday the *Spectator* put the historic view of his life into happy phrase when it said: 'Mr. Meredith is the last of a great generation, for, intensely modern as he is in so many ways, he began to publish verse before Wordsworth died, and as a novelist he was the contemporary of Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot. His life spanned, indeed, the whole Victorian age. And what an age was that! Inspired by Tennyson and Browning's songs, and depicted by the brush of Watts, its men, its causes, its discoveries, and its revolutions are unsurpassed in history.' In this great generation, George Meredith is assuredly one of the great figures.

### III

#### THE EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY

A health, a ringing health, unto the king  
Of all our hearts to-day! But what proud song  
Should follow on the thought, nor do him wrong?  
Except the sea were harp, each mirthful string  
The lovely lightning of the nights of Spring,  
And Dawn the lonely listener, glad and grave  
With colours of the sea-shell and the wave  
In brightening eye and cheek, there is none to sing  
Drink to him, as men upon an Alpine peak  
Brim one immortal cup of crimson wine,  
And into it drop one pure cold crust of snow,  
Then hold it up, too rapturously to speak,  
And drink—to the mountains, line on glittering line,  
Surging away into the sunset-glow.

ALFRED NOYES, in the *Daily Graphic*, February 12, 1908.

IN recent literary annals there have been two events, each unique in its way, and both significant of the remarkable interest taken by the public of our time in the lives of its leading men of letters. The display of public sympathy with Mr. Rudyard Kipling, when he lay at death's door in New York in 1899, was something quite without parallel in the personal history of our literature. The cable tingled with messages and bulletins concerning the young author, as though he had been a reigning monarch and the fate of a dynasty hung upon his life. Mr. Kipling, by some subtle stroke of genius—for it is futile to deny the tremendous power of the man—had got hold of the mob not less than, by sheer craftsmanship, he had captured the literati, and thus an immense public, coterminous with the Anglo-Saxon peoples, was avid of news about one who had stirred it deeply. Hence, perhaps, that wonderful outburst of international sympathy when he was passing through a crisis of ill-health.

Nine years later the celebration of the eightieth birthday of George Meredith was the occasion of even greater journalistic commotion. But we must not suppose that none of the authors of past times were the subjects of similar solicitude to their contemporaries,

though incidents equal in significance to those just described are lacking in our literary chronicles. The publicity of the modern press is a new factor that accounts for much in this connection. We know that so keen was the public interest in the development of Richardson's sluggish romances that when the part of 'Pamela' containing the account of that tearful creature's wedding was published and circulated throughout England there were villages where the church bells were rung as in celebration of an actual marriage. We know that Scott, Byron, Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, and many another famous author received in his lifetime public homage of the most remarkable kind; but, all that notwithstanding, we may justly describe the celebration of Meredith's eightieth birthday as one of the most notable events in the history of modern letters.

Acting under a common impulse, every journalist and man of letters in a position to render homage to the most illustrious of living authors took occasion to do so, with the result that what was doubtless in each case a spontaneous act of hero-worship assumed in the mass—so widespread was the celebration—the appearance of having been 'engineered,' to quote the phrase of a cynical critic. It was truly 'the event of the week'; every daily newspaper, from the *Times* down to the least provincial evening sheet, consecrated a leading article to the 'grand old man of letters,' who masqueraded for that day in many a quaint and unusual guise, according to the intimacy of the writers with his work and personality. The news columns of the papers were brisk for days with paragraphs and Meredithiana; the press agencies telegraphed and cabled tiny 'interviews' with the novelist to the ends of earth; a motley crowd of reporters haunted the precincts of Box Hill, as keen as if a murder had been committed at Flint Cottage; the least incident of the birthday of the veteran was telegraphed to head-quarters; photographers had been busy 'snapping' him when he came forth in his donkey-chaise; pages of illustrations—most of them deplorable—were given in the papers; there were numerous 'special memoirs,' in which every writer contrived to quote that old familiar stanza from 'Love in the Valley,' beginning:

Happy, happy hour when the white star hovers  
and the equally hackneyed lines:

Into the breast that gives the rose  
Shall I with shuddering fall?

Never, in sooth, was so much written and printed in the space of one week about any man who had not achieved the distinction of

committing a singularly revolting crime. So magnificent a tribute to mere literary genius and intellectual greatness made one feel that the British press had taken leave of its senses. But we all rejoiced, and some of us who had been at pains to study the works and follow the life-story of the master derived a good deal of amusement from reading many a 'special memoir' that had obviously been written by a journalist whose entire knowledge of his subject was at second-hand. The splendid muddle of indiscriminate praise, the absurdly invidious epithets—such as 'King of Novelists,' 'Last of the Great Victorians,' 'Our One Great Novelist'—flung abroad with the prodigal hand of the journalist who would to-morrow be 'writing up' the latest jewel robbery or the art of Phyllis Dare, was all very embarrassing; but it was a pleasant change.

Of course, there was much solid and valuable appreciation amidst all this froth; all the great London journals of good repute discharging their parts with becoming dignity, and many of the provincial dailies touching the occasion to profitable issue. In short, the press did its duty well by one who in his day had done his duty by the press. If there were any person lingering in darkness as to who and what this George Meredith was, and that person read any newspaper on the 13th of February, 1908, he could not well avoid making some acquaintance with the name at least.

My purpose in this chapter is to compile from the forbidding mass of these newspaper criticisms and reports an account of the eightieth birthday that may possess some permanent value in the future as a record of a notable event in the career of a great author whose earlier and middle life had been as barren of public interest as his old age was embarrassed therewith. From the soberer chronicles of such journals as the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Standard* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* it is possible, I think, to construct a useful record of the event.

In several of the newspaper chronicles of the scene at Flint Cottage on the birthday there is to be noted a similarity of phrase, indicating that while the correspondent wrote as though he alone of the representatives of the press had been admitted to the presence of the novelist, he must have been one of a select few who had received that privilege together; a modification of the American custom which enables a celebrity to be 'interviewed' by a squad of reporters from different papers at the same time. Hence some of the *obiter dicta* which fell from the white-haired philosopher on his birthday are worded somewhat differently in the various accounts;

but the *Telegraph* correspondent, whose long article is in every way excellent and has a richer literary flavour than most of the others, seems to have caught the spirit of the occasion in a way that makes his description worthy of quotation here. After a spirited personal sketch of Meredith, he goes on to say :

Mr. Meredith commenced the day with his customary drive, although he had to shorten it in order to be back to receive the friends who had come down to Box Hill to congratulate him. 'Picnic' was again in the shafts, with Cole at his head, and in the absence of his daughter, Mrs. Sturgis, who is out of England at present, Lady Edward Cecil, who is the daughter of his old friend Admiral Maxse, accompanied him. Shortly before noon Mr. Clement Shorter, with his wife, Dora Siegersen Shorter, and Mr. Edward Clodd, came down from London to present the memorial of congratulation on his eightieth birthday, signed by dozens of his old friends and colleagues, not only in poetry and fiction, but in politics, art, the drama and journalism, in England and America. The presentation, needless to say, was a purely informal function, and Mr. Shorter, after a stay of half-an-hour, left with his friends, declaring that he had not for some years seen Mr. Meredith in better health.

A little later I was received by Mr. Meredith. He was sitting in an arm-chair between the fire and a window that looks on to his beloved downs, surrounded by his books. On every table were dozens of telegrams of felicitation. In each corner of the room and out in the little hall were bouquets of flowers. A wonderful old leonine man, with a face like Hermes grown old, the long, white hair lying loosely about his ears, with a rug round his knees and his hand to his ear, Mr. Meredith was already engaged in conversation, now listening, now speaking. In repose the face took on an almost feminine grace of expression. When he spoke the deep, rich, resonant voice, and the animation of the countenance, seemed to give added stature to the aged frame. Much of what he said had reference to the many friends who had wired to him on his birthday, and was of a purely personal nature. In everything that concerned himself and the homage being paid to him on his birthday Mr. Meredith was characteristically modest.

'I have been climbing the stairs for eighty years,' he exclaimed, 'and I have done with the pulpit.'<sup>1</sup>

Pointing to the sheaves of telegrams lying about him, he had previously exclaimed, 'They make me think too much of myself. It is a kind of harvest that I wish could have been reaped by a younger man.'

But stung, as one might say, by references to affairs of a more

<sup>1</sup> Another version of this epigrammatic phrase is as follows : 'When a man has climbed the steps of eighty years he should not use them as a pulpit.'



George at the wheel

GEORGE WOULD BE FIFTY-NINE TOMORROW HIS FIFTY-THIRD BIRTHDAY



public and less private nature, he launched out with characteristic vigour.

'Suffragists!' said the great delineator of the female character. 'I have always stood up for the intellectual capacities of women. I like to see the combative spirit in them. It is as it should be. Certainly they should be given the use of intellectual weapons. But I am not in agreement with anything that is bad taste and bad strategy. These rowdy scenes! No! Not that. That is not the way. There is a better. I like to see the combative spirit in men and women. After the Napoleonic wars England settled down to a time of pleasure and ease—too much pleasure, too much contentment to be pleasurable and to forget. An Amyclean case! England laughed at soldiering. It was ashamed of seeing its officers in their uniforms. We need to be reminded of these times about the Napoleonic wars. It is an ozone. The Territorial Army! I know my dear friend Mr. Haldane. He is a strong man. But for myself I go further.

'I believe that universal service should be adopted—a nation of soldiers; the spirit of the soldier in every walk of life.

'Life is a long and continuous struggle. It is necessarily combative. Otherwise we cease. Let the struggle go on. Let us be combative; but let us also be kind.

'As for me, I do not wish to talk about myself. I do not want you to write much about me. Say that I am well, and that you found me sitting in my chair, delivering myself freely of very Radical sentiments.'

One would have liked to have put many other 'points' to the great novelist. . . . But the novelist had a trying afternoon before him, and the habitual calm of his home life was being continuously interrupted with the arrival of telegrams, flowers and visitors. Shortly before four o'clock Mr. Anthony Hope Hawkins, Mr. Israel Zangwill and Mr. Herbert Trench, the author of 'Apollo and the Seaman,' presented themselves at the house to hand the novelist the address of congratulation on behalf of the Society of Authors, of which he is president. Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Trench came from London, Mr. Zangwill from Dorchester. They were asked to tea (Mr. and Mrs. William Meredith also being present), and charmed with another literary causerie.

The subject of Mr. Meredith's poetry, of poetry generally, and of the unfinished novel ('The Journalist') again cropped up, and the novelist outlined a new story, to be called, perhaps, 'The Benefactor of the Race,' or some such title, which should deal with the efforts of a man who wanted to improve humanity and was for ever getting into quarrels in endeavouring to do so, and who could not marry the lady he desired to in fulfilment of his System, etcetera.

'Why don't you write it yourself?' he was asked. Mr. Meredith broke into that genial torrential laugh of his that electrifies every



one who hears him, and which some one has said is the merry brother of his serious voice. 'They would want me to cut out the excrescences,' he replied. 'No, no! Somebody else must write it. I give them the idea.'

'Let us have it; we want it, "excrescences" and all,' it was persisted. But the great novelist only laughed.

Did his hearers fully realise—did they really believe—that the grand old man before them has far exceeded the allotted Three Score Years and Ten? With the afternoon sun now streaming through the window on to the leonine head and locks, colouring it like to 'a shock of corn that cometh in his season,' were they not illusioned into the vision of the Prophet of Sweet Sanity as he was forty years ago?

For myself, I felt that my own brief interview with him was of that fleeting but wonderful description that only the true spirit of genius—the very presence of the Spirit of Comedy—could have stamped so indelibly, and yet so intangibly, on the mind of a visitor. It was, after all, only an impression.

It was the impression not of a great man, upon whose heart Time had laid its hand to 'deadens its vibrations,' but one to whom the prospect of the near close of life had set up a renewed youthfulness, a renewed ardour, and a renewed response to that Mother Earth and her Children, which he has loved and written about so well.

This is indeed a very pleasant and acceptable picture which the adroit pen of the *Telegraph* correspondent sketches for us. All who saw the novelist and wrote about him on his eightieth birthday express their surprise at his apparent vigour and his cheerfulness, despite his infirmity. A paragraph that concludes the *Daily News'* account of the day indicates how sincere was the admiration which the sage of Box Hill had awakened in the heart of many an unknown student of his works:

All day there has been a silent pilgrimage to Box Hill which Mr. Meredith has not seen or heard of—the pilgrimage of those who know the man only through the leaves of his books. They have come by road and rail; they have stood for a minute or two outside Flint Cottage, registering their tributes in their hearts, and have passed on.

The memorial which was presented to Meredith was mounted on vellum and beautifully bound in dark blue crushed Levant morocco, the monogram 'G. M.' being worked in each corner in gold, while the inside lining was of cream-watered silk. The address read as follows:

To

GEORGE MEREDITH, O.M.

Upon his eightieth birthday.

DEAR MR. MEREDITH,—Many of your fellow-countrymen will join in felicitating you upon this your eightieth birthday. We desire on our own behalf to thank you for the splendid work in prose and poetry that we owe to your pen—to say how much we rejoice in the growing recognition of this work—and to thank you for the example you have set to the world of lofty ideals embodied not only in books but in life. Most heartily do we wish for you a continuance of health and happiness.

The names of Meredith's old friends and literary colleagues, A. C. Swinburne, Mr. Thomas Hardy, Viscount Morley and Mr. Frederick Greenwood, were inscribed upon the vellum, and there were some 250 other signatures, of which a classified list was given in the *Times*. Among these were so many men and women of the highest distinction that the few who did not exactly add to the weight of the memorial were lost, so to say, in the general brilliance of the throng. One could have wished, however, that the phrasing of the address had taken on a somewhat more literary flavour.

His own countrymen were not alone in their felicitations of the great writer. Although several distinguished Americans had signed the general memorial when in England, a separate address reached him from the United States, the text of which and the signatories were as follow :

To GEORGE MEREDITH

The subscribers, American men and women of letters, desire to unite with their English brethren in offering to you upon your eightieth birthday cordial good wishes for your health and happiness. We are grateful to you for the works with which you have enriched our common literature, and we trust that the remainder of your life may be brightened by the knowledge of the admiration and respect of a multitude of friends, unknown as well as known, in both hemispheres.

Henry Adams, John Burroughs, G. W. Cable, John W. Cunliffe, Richard Watson Gilder, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Julia Ward Howe, W. D. Howells, Charles Eliot Norton, Agnes Repplier, Charles G. D. Roberts, F. H. Sykes, Edward Clarence Stedman.

The birthday was an eminently suitable opportunity for certain of the novelist's fellow-writers to pen some appreciative words on

the doyen of their craft, and the *Daily News* gathered a little sheaf of such pleasant mementoes of the occasion, some of which were distinctly interesting. Mr. Thomas Hardy excused himself thus :

I have known Mr. Meredith for so long a time—forty years within a few months—and his personality is such a living one to me, that I cannot reach a sufficiently detached point of view to write a critical estimate of his great place in the world of letters.

Madam Sarah Grand wrote :

George Meredith and age ! The two ideas are incompatible. You cannot reckon him in years. He has come and he will stay for all time. The great virile voice we know so well and love has spoken truth, and truth is everlasting.

Sir Gilbert Parker thus :

It is given to few men to approach their latter days with an accumulating reputation ; but this has been granted to George Meredith. . . . He has been an inspiration to some of the best intellects of our time, and he must remain a fountain from which pure waters may be drawn for generations of lovers of literature yet to come. He has never been a fashion ; he is a master and is permanent.

Of peculiar interest was the letter from Mr. William Michael Rossetti, who had known Meredith at the outset of his career and reviewed the ' Poems ' of 1851 at the time of their appearance. Thus fifty-seven years after, wrote Mr. Rossetti about the same poet :

With some shame I acknowledge that I am not very well acquainted with the writings of George Meredith, whether prose or poetry ; and I regret to say this all the more because at one period of my life I was rather closely associated with him personally. I was, however, one of the early admirers of his first volume of poems, 1851, and I then expressed my admiration in print. I know some of his other writings—especially ' Shagpat,' ' Modern Love,' ' The Egoist,' and ' The Tragic Comedians.'

It has become almost a commonplace by now to recognise—as I do—the supremacy of Meredith in certain qualities : brilliancy, insight, pungency, incisiveness. His discernment is extreme, perhaps excessive, in that it leads him into the constant exhibition of his own ' cleverness,' and makes him rather the student and the dissector of men and women than their sympathetic delineator, and intricates his style into scintillations of epigram, the terms of which are more patent to himself than they always are to his reader.

Mr. Edmund Gosse, who had signed both the memorial of 1908 and the congratulatory letter of 1898, touched upon the loss of old friends which the years had brought to the aged author, and went on to say :

Inevitably, the long advance of years brings solitude, and Mr. Meredith does not fail to suffer from the glory of his old age. But I rejoice to think that few could suffer less. The friends fall off, but in an imagination so vivid and so fresh as his they follow by his side; he is attended by them still in a cloud. And if the early companionships withdraw, as withdraw they must, Mr. Meredith has that vitality of genius, that attractive glow of sympathy, which brings new generations around him. He burns in our midst, a steady flame, and more and more the young, with their moth-like spirits, wheel around in adoration and surround him with a palpitating bodyguard. He may be eighty years old to-day, to calculate by the foolishness of mathematics, but in reality he is just so old as, and no older than, the youngest heart that has responded to his fine appeal.

But perhaps there was no personal tribute so interesting or so quaintly original in expression as that contributed by Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton to the *Daily Graphic*. At the outset it must have pleased Meredith himself to find, amid all the ecstasies of the press, that Mr. Watts-Dunton had the sobriety to remind the journalistic world that there was a poet of some eminence, named Algernon Charles Swinburne, who was still alive. Meredith, we may be sure, would have been eager to admit that in European literature his was a name that came second to that of Swinburne. Mr. Watts-Dunton gives a humorous but yet a cogent reason for a certain feeling of dubiety that came upon him as he signed the memorial :

Honoured as I must surely feel at being invited to sign such an address, I have to make the confession that I signed it with some dubiety—a dubiety which I should not have felt had the memorial been addressed to an Oriental poet—to a poet of Cathay—to that prince of sonneteers, for instance, the Poet Pin, who, to the great joy of Rossetti, visited London in 1866, and afterwards favoured his guests with his diary. Had the address been to 'the Poet-Laureate and assistant head clerk in the Board of Affairs at Peking, bearing by the honorary licence the button of the third official degree,' who, while lunching at Woolwich Arsenal, 'composed a couple of sonnets in pentameter during the repast,' I should not, I repeat, have had the least hesitation about the good breeding of signing it. But England and the land of Kubla Khan are two very different

poetic domains. In the Flowery Land the recipient of such an address would have perfectly understood its import. . . . Throughout Cathay it would have been perfectly understood what such an address meant. For among the Celestials the mere passage of years over any man's head is in itself an honour—in itself a crown of glory. The interest felt in an octogenarian is that of unadulterated reverence. . . . It is pleasant to think that on the Parnassus of the Poet Pin, when one bard meets another, the greatest compliment he can show to his fellow is to improvise a sonnet, a rapturous sonnet, exclaiming, 'Brother Bard, how delightfully old you are looking this morning, older than ever! May your beautiful songs of to-day be worthy of the beautiful ripeness of your years!' . . . The obtuseness of the Anglo-Saxon mind is declared by the way in which English and Americans talk of the old age of a man of genius like Meredith. If it is the fact that no man in health really feels himself to be old, what shall be said about a man of genius like George Meredith, who—as I told one of those who is presenting the memorial—is younger than the youngest now invading his august privacy? The great artist is ever young. . . . All honour then to the youngest writer of our time, except one who is younger still.

Yet the younger writer was the first to pass away; the turf was still loose on Swinburne's grave when the earth was heaped over the coffin of his friend in Dorking churchyard.

No useful purpose would be served by preserving a selection of the anonymous 'leading articles' which appeared in the daily and weekly journals on the eightieth birthday. Most of them met the need of the fleeting hour and were without claim to longer life. But the first paragraph of the *Times* 'leader' stated in well-balanced phrase the proper aspect of the occasion, and indeed the whole article was worthy of the best traditions of a journal which, from the first, had been an ardent and reasonable exponent of the genius of George Meredith:

Mr. George Meredith is eighty to-day, but still with all the youthfulness of heart and the joy in life and vigorous action which have been the burden of his works for well-nigh sixty years. Those—an ever-growing band—who on the threshold of manhood first felt the thrill of his brave words and drank in the glorious meaning which he gave to earth and all its creatures, will rejoice that he is still with us to learn something of our sense of thankfulness. The debt was for many years felt by only a few; for long it was but falteringly expressed; but to-day we all acclaim in him and Mr. Swinburne the two chief glories of our age, the Titans still surviving from that splendid mid-Victorian era of Tennyson and Browning, of Dickens, Thackeray, and William Morris. Moreover, cheap editions of his

novels and books written about him bear witness that it is not merely a name that we honour, but that his words, in spite of their difficulty, have made their way home to this English people whom he loves.

One little incident of the day is deserving of a record. Mr. W. Clark Russell, the celebrated writer of sea-stories, sent the following letter to the *Times*:

I was not asked to sign the birthday memorial to our great novelist. I should have been proud to do so. Perhaps I did better. I wrote to him a few lines of respectful congratulation. I beg to send you his letter, which I will ask you to return. Mr. Meredith's reference to quantity is a comment upon what I said—that this is the age of words. The publishers ask for words—not ideas, description, characterisation, and the like, but words, words, words; and they get them. I should be sorry not to make one in the vast crowd whose thoughts and affections were with Mr. George Meredith to-day.

Meredith's letter in reply to that sent him by Mr. Clark Russell was as follows:

Dear Sir,—A kind word to me in my ripe age from a brother of the pen, whose descriptions of bluewater scenes have often given me pleasure, is very welcome. Quantity in production certainly we have, but I notice here and there good stuff, and promise among some of the younger men. Besides, you know the seventh wave. There must be a gathering of the waters before a big surge is thrown on shore. And my observation tells me that the minor work of the present day is altogether superior to that of the mid-Victorian time—and before it. The hour is usually unjust to its own.

Yours very truly,

GEORGE MEREDITH.

BOX HILL, DORKING, *Jan.* 24, 1908.

One is glad that Mr. Clark Russell was omitted from those invited to sign the memorial—to which less eminent names than his were attached—since his own letter to the master-novelist drew forth so charming a reply. Old age is seldom the time of generous sympathy with the new generation, and Mr. Watts-Dunton's denial that genius ever experiences old age is supported by this characteristic Meredithian letter. On his eightieth birthday the heart of the great writer was obviously with the younger men, those who in their careers were where he had been nearly sixty years before them. And as the hearts of these were with the master who has influenced so many of them—not always, alas! to the happiest issues, though

the fault is not with him—Meredith must have experienced on the 12th of February, 1908, the pleasantest of all the emotions described by his disciple Stevenson when he wrote, 'I like to fancy that a grateful spirit gives as good as it gets.' Doubtless he had long got over that fear of becoming a celebrity which, twenty years before, in writing to a correspondent, he had entertained.

In every sense, then, was this eightieth birthday memorable: it was worth living for. When we think of the posthumous adulation of great writers, from Dante to Burns, whose lives might have been so sweetened by a mere tincture of the praise and admiration lavished over their ashes, we must conclude that George Meredith was singularly happy in the afterglow of fame which warmed and lighted the long and tranquil evening of his life.

Hater of sham and seeker of true worth,  
 Wise with your nine-and-seventy summer-tides,  
 With eye undimmed and youth that still abides  
 To love the dawn and things of tender birth,  
 Be with us still to make that mighty mirth  
 That shook the ass-car'd crown and cracked his sides  
 And loosed your Shibli from the Hall of Brides,  
 To shave all Shagpat follies from the earth.

Still may the loved South-wester fan your face,  
 The lark and nightingale delight you still,  
 And corals braid your holly and your yew;  
 We need your help who found this earth a place  
 Fit for the training of God's sovereign will,  
 And taught us by your life the love you knew.

CANON RAWNSLEY, in the *Daily News*.

## IV

### PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

SOME authors are, in their own personalities, greater than their books; others there are whose written works are greater than themselves. It is easier to state this than to illustrate it, since we may assume that the best of a man usually gets into his books. Perhaps the explanation is that certain personalities are so opulent that not all their writings can exhaust them, while others of lesser mould contrive to rise above their ordinary selves under the afflatus of creative literature. The work of George Meredith is so eminent, so vast in its horizon, so profound in imagination, insight, philosophy, in form so rare and individual, that it might be thought a depreciation of its value to place him among the first-named class of authors; yet that is his place. Whatever the future will do or leave undone in respect to his poetry and romance, it cannot ignore the man. His personality, had he never written 'Modern Love' or 'The Egoist,' would still awaken the interest of posterity as that of a great man who moved with firm, sure and stately tread through a great epoch of British history. He will live because he was George Meredith. Dr. Johnson lives by virtue of his splendid insistent personality and not by reason of anything he wrote. How much the greater, then, should Meredith's hold on posterity be, since he has given to it a mass of literature which criticism will never allow it to ignore?

Any attempt at character-portraiture of such a man must have to meet unusual difficulties. His personality is mountainous, and who has ever read a description of Mont Blanc or of Vesuvius that would serve for all the seasons or all its phases of one day, one hour even? So is it with Meredith; no study by one hand, however gifted, can paint the man for us. We need many sketches from different points of view by many different artists, that from the mass we may disengage a general, or a composite, portrait which will serve to each of us as the nearest we can come by of the actual man. Such is the purpose of the present chapter. Fortun-



ately the portfolio whence one may choose these sketches is amply stocked, and in the end we can hardly fail to gather some serviceable notion of his remarkable personality.

There is about all we have read of George Meredith something of that cleansing breeze that blows across the white cliffs of England's 'surge vexed shore.' His very name has the power to image in our mind a wind-blown figure, erect on a gusty day, forward reaching, wholesome. Mr. Barrie, who touched off Professor Blackie in a telling phrase—'Blackie carries his breeze with him,'—might have done as much by Meredith had he known him in his lusty manhood. But I feel that Meredith, too, must have carried his breeze with him. For though he was timid and sensitive as a boy, 'at eighteen,' as he once remarked in conversation, he 'determined not to be afraid again,' and we can well believe he speedily schooled himself to that courageous outlook on life which his clear and steady eye, no less than his written word, suggested. Mr. Justin McCarthy in his 'Reminiscences' has given us a graphic sketch of him in middle life:

I think the first impression which George Meredith made on me was that of extraordinary and exuberant vitality. When I saw him for the first time, he had left his younger days a long way behind him, and yet he had the appearance and the movements of one endowed with a youth that could not fade; energy was in every movement; vital power spoke in every gesture. He loved bodily exercises of all kinds; he delighted to take long brisk walks—'spins,' as he called them—along the highways and the byways of the neighbourhood; and he loved to wander through the woods, and to lie in the grass, and I have no doubt he would have enjoyed climbing the trees. He seemed to have in him much of the temperament of the fawn: he seemed to have sprung from the very bosom of Nature herself.

His talk was wonderful, and, perhaps, not the least wonderful thing about it was that it seemed so very like his writing. Now it was Richard Feverel who talked to you, and now Adrian Harley, and then Beauchamp—not that he ever repeated any of the recorded sayings of these men, but that he talked as one could imagine any of them capable of talking on any suggested subject. . . . He was a man of strong likings and dislikings, in letters and in art; his very prejudices had a charm in them because they gave him such admirable opportunities for scattering new and bewildering fancies around his subject.

Like Matthew Arnold, he had a strong sympathy with the Celtic spirit in poetry and in literature generally; but nobody could be less like Matthew Arnold in his manner and in his expression. He could

rattle off humorous verse, especially of the comic or satirical order, at will; and I dare say he felt a certain gratification now and then in utterly bewildering his hearers. . . .

Meredith, as I have said, loved all manner of bodily exercises; and, indeed, it amazed me when I first used to visit him, to see a man, no longer young, indulge in such feats of strength and agility. It delighted him to play with great iron weights, and to throw heavy clubs into the air and catch them as they fell, and twirl them round his head as if they had been light bamboo canes. I remember wondering, indeed, sometimes, whether such exercises and such feats of strength were not taxing too far the physical powers of a man who had already passed his prime, and whether over-taxed nature would not some day show that she had been taxed too far. But, at the same time, the general impression which George Meredith gave one was that of the fawn-like creature, the child of Nature who must always be young, as Nature herself is always young. I do not think I ever met a man in whom the physical and the mental forces were such absolute rivals and equals as they seemed to be in George Meredith at the time when I first had the happiness of knowing him.

Meredith had already entered his sixtieth year when Miss Flora Shaw's (*Lady Lugard*) brilliant study of his work was published in the *New Princeton Review* of March, 1887. This is one of the earliest glimpses of the man—the walker and talker—that appeared in the press:

At the foot of Box Hill, in one of the lovely valleys of the Surrey downs, a cottage stands, half hidden by encircling trees. A little space of flowers spreads before it, an old yew hedge screens the garden from curious passing eyes. Within, for the privileged who pass the gate, an apple-bordered walk leads up the slope to a terrace underneath some hanging woods, where Mr. Meredith has built himself a study. Here, toward sunset, the fortunate may meet Mr. Meredith himself coming down between the apple-trees. He is serviceably shod, he usually carries a stout stick in his hand, the head—iron-grey now—is held erect, the eyes kindle to light beneath thoughtfully knit brows, the mouth, for those who know him, seems ever ready to break into sonorous speech. He has come down prepared to walk and talk. These walks and talks are among the great enjoyments of his friends, and as round the neighbourhood of Rydal Water in an older generation, so round the neighbourhood of Box Hill now must hang many a lasting association of intellectual pleasure. It was my good fortune to find myself in his company on the turf back of Box Hill one brilliant, breezy morning. Our eyes travelled over the valley where park woods, russet with the changing leaf, clustered beneath the box and juniper of surrounding slopes, and threw into vivid contrast the yews of

Norbury, which are asserted to have held their place for upwards of two thousand years. West of the valley the greens and orange rolled skyward, bearing a tower solitary upon its highest point. Southward, the Weald of Sussex rolled under light October mists to Brighton downs, and legendary glimpses of the sea. And while we mounted, with the horizon widening beneath us, we spoke of the share the intellect has had in human development. Our talk was of the nature of Socratic dialogue, slight and tentative remark on one side serving only to mark the paragraphs of full discourse upon the other.

Following Miss Shaw's slight glimpse of Meredith in his outdoor garb, shod for walking and pouring out brilliant talk on every topic, comes the first, and surely the most charmingly written, account of a visit to him at Box Hill. Signed 'W. M. F.' (William Morton Fullerton), the article appeared in the *Boston Advertiser* (U.S.A.), December 17, 1888. Mr. Fullerton's most admirable essay, following Miss Shaw's brilliant critical review, introduced Meredith to America twenty years ago. It gives a picture of the novelist in the early years of what we may call his period of world-fame, and a pleasanter picture we could not wish to have :

It was an almost Indian summer afternoon which I had taken for this journey, and as we walked down the country road the trees, I noted, had turned colour on the side of the hill. Mr. Meredith met me with his nervous little dachshund at the station. He had his stout walking-stick and his light grey English walking-suit to match, with just a dash of red at the neck, and he was evidently in the midst of the afternoon jaunt which it is his wont to take. Iron-grey hair with ripples in it came out from under his round cloth hat the same material as his coat. A bright eye, a straight nose, a compact, lithe, broad-shouldered figure, a person with fine breeziness in all his movements, and a strong step upon the earth without a touch of uncertainty in it, and all confidence that the ground was sufficient to support him, as he measured it with buoyant stride, and chatted on to the swinging of his cane—that was Mr. Meredith as I first saw him. The first impression was certainly striking. The last impression when, at the fire, head uncovered, he sat in a dark coat after dinner, was not less striking. But until I saw him thus I did not discover how exceedingly handsome as well as animated his face is.

I was immediately impressed with the splendidly healthy tone and superabundant life of the man. There was vigour and sanity at his way of looking at things, and no sentimentalism. One need not talk with Mr. Meredith to discover his hatred of sham and sentimentality; this is the prominent key-note of his work. But I

had it anew impressed upon me in a fashion that carried with it at the time all the force of irrefutable demonstration. It is always a nice process, that of moving off from the shore out of the shallows into the full stream of conversation; and in that delicate operation I, when it came to my turn, had done a good deal of futile splashing in the water, making some wholly obvious and commonplace reference to the changing leaves, and the sombreness of their colour in comparison with that of our American foliage, thanks to the maples; and I finished with a platitude about the English hues being more pleasing, as they were less obtrusive and suggestive of the dying year, which meant the flickering of one more series of candles on another Christmas night that would never return. But how axiomatically unfortunate!

Mr. Meredith had no place—and justly ‘oo, for I had said what I had said with only a half-hearted sincerity, as some authors pad their books to fill up—Mr. Meredith had no place for sentimentality of that sort. What was there in the thought of the passing years that should be sad? It was life, more life and fuller, for which men should be ever seeking, to be sure. But life was not to be had by whining into a past that had turned tail and fled. Rather, men must look up bravely, planted on the honest present, to the problems of the pressing future, never content to live in a fool’s paradise, but always courting activity, and making use of moments as they came, so bravely, so well, that such moments would be quite transformed into the energy of character, not left behind to haunt you like sloughed chrysalises of vanished butterfly hopes and impulses. How eloquently he did crush my poor thought, which was altogether unworthy to be sponsor for such eloquence. I recalled his saying: ‘You may start a sermon from stones to hit the stars.’ It was refreshing and encouraging. I felt again the full tonic breeze that I had always found blowing through the pages of Mr. Meredith’s books.

But Mr. Meredith’s fancy ran with that little dog, who was undoubtedly very clever and very ugly. It torments me that I cannot now remember his name. I am sure it was not ‘Geist.’ He was into everything, like a curious woman with nerves. It was amusing to hear his master talk to him. On the road as we neared the house we met a vagrant fellow, such as we in America would call a ‘tramp,’ who begged and expostulated by voice and gestures (it could not be said of one who pressed his suit with ‘My good sirs’ as close upon his heels as he did, that he was a *non sequitur*) that we should give him something. He was on the road to the poor-house, but certainly would not die a natural death on the way; and Mr. Meredith’s reply was good political economy: ‘I never give to a man I don’t know—I never give to a man I don’t know.’ And so at last the fellow passed us by. The episode was annoying, and there was nothing to do but to whistle up the dog and amuse ourselves with him.

Since in the present chapter we are confined as closely as practicable to matters that concern the individuality of the man, even apart from his home-life, to which our attention will turn in due course, I pass over for the moment Mr. Fullerton's reminiscence of a Box Hill evening, after which he goes on to say :

A room that has once heard Mr. Meredith's voice dominating, among other friends, the talk, and out of which he has gone, is like a Greek theatre that has sounded to the echoes of *Æschylean* and *Aristophanic* drama and has lost the voice of the protagonist and the chorus all at the same time. For Mr. Meredith is both of these at once, without stretch of figure. It is not an uncommon thing to say of an author that he talks just as he writes. But that is literally true of Mr. Meredith. If one will recall one of the familiar pages of those novels it will be evident what I mean, and how very remarkable it is that this statement may be made. But more even than this must be said, because the light sparkle on the foam of his chaffing, and the broad gleam of the blue sky reflected on the clear expanse of his deeper utterances, when the conversation is serious and calm, the iterant insistence of an idea by gesture or repeated look, all these qualities can be seen only face to face with this master of eloquent and spontaneous expression. These are the appropriate atmosphere, as it were, through which we look at the most wonderful Gothic structure in England, Mr. Meredith's style. Mr. Meredith's eloquence is simply exhaustless. His memory is as capacious as De Quincey's, and his fund of ideas is almost beyond measure splendid. Drolleries, witticisms, humours, he has, and a wonderful, unique trick of god-like chaffing; but these are nothing in comparison with his fancy and play of ideas. . . . As I look back now upon that evening, one of the chief impressions which I find is left upon me was Mr. Meredith's almost amphitheatrean powers, the prodigality of his genius, like the prodigality of light. Ben Jonson has said of certain obscure writers of his time that 'their writings need sunshine.' Mr. Meredith's writings frequently need sunshine; but his speech never. This is what the personal contact gives, what the voice, the mouth, the eye, and the laugh may assure us—sunshine.

Of all the writers who have been privileged to see Meredith in his own home I find that only one has noted his love of children, and that was Miss Anne Wakeman Lathrop, an American lady, who published an account of her visit to Box Hill in the *Idler* of November, 1893, from which I take this very attractive picture :

Mr. Meredith is fond of children. You remember his vigorous sketches of boys in 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' and are ready

to believe that your entertaining host loves child-life, as he has already admitted that he loves the society of young people. With the appearance of after-dinner coffee in the drawing-room, arrives a group of little girls and boys, with their mother. These small visitors range from eight to twelve years of age. Instantly you observe the gentlest side of Mr. Meredith's nature. He adapts himself to the children, with a mingling of man of the world polish, and frank, almost boyish, ingenuousness. He does not tower above them, but treats them like miniature men and women, and always with attentive gallantry. The effect on the children is to make them the more polite and earnest than is usual with childhood. A proposition is made by the little folk to be shown some wonderful red-berried bushes in an adjoining park, to which the Merediths have access. Alas! the key to the gate cannot be found. A disappointed maiden remarks tentatively, 'We cannot go without the key.' On this, Mr. Meredith makes a dance step, throws up his long, slim hands above his head, snaps his fingers as a sort of castanet prelude, and improvises a brief comic ditty, of which the refrain runs, 'But not without the key, says she, oh! not without the key.' This so amuses the children that the song has to be repeated, while their rippling laughter fills all the room. Nor does Mr. Meredith forget to substitute some equally enjoyable treat for his young guests, to make up for their temporary disappointment.

Reverting to Mr. McCarthy's description of Meredith's violent exercises, it is to be feared there is reason for supposing that these bodily exertions in which he indulged, out of sheer high spirits, at a time of life when most men have to observe physical caution, may have had something to do with the permanent collapse of his physique in later years. But even when he could no longer take his walks abroad with swinging stride, he remained 'an outdoor man' and continued, by means of his donkey-chaise, to keep ever in touch with the roads and hedgerows he had loved so well. A writer in *Fry's Magazine*, of November, 1904, made an interesting little study of the novelist from this point of view, in the course of which he wrote :

It is fitting that the greatest living novelist in this vigorous and healthy period should be a prophet of the open air. No one has preached the gospel of the open air more eloquently or more successfully. To the young men who gathered about him like a band of disciples in his early manhood—among whom were Mr. John Morley—the great novelist always gave one sovran piece of advice: 'Live in the open, and study nature.' Much of the philosophy of our age derived its inspiration from this advice.

And George Meredith is not the worshipper of nature who

believes only in star-gazing or in mooning walks. Solitude is good, and lonely, deep-thinking walks are also good; But games and sports—vigorous and joyful games in the open air are good too. He is a great believer in sport. Everybody, he holds, should learn to delight in outdoor games, and should learn to find pleasure in bodily exercise. Sport is not, according to him, an end in itself, but an important part of Nature's wonderful scheme. You cannot leave it with impunity.

'I have always loved the face of Nature,' he told the writer, 'the dreariest, when a sky was over it—and consented to her spirit. She loves us no better than her other productions, but she signifies clearly that intelligence can make her subservient to our needs: and one proof of that is the joy in a healthy body, causing an increased lucidity of the mind. Therefore, exercise of the body is good, and sport of all kinds to be encouraged. Sport will lead of necessity to observation of Nature. Let us be in the open air as much as possible, engaged in healthy rivalry with our fellows, or with the instructive, elusive game we are after.'

This study of Meredith the outdoor man, from which I have quoted, led a writer in the *Daily Chronicle*—Mr. R. M. Leonard—to pursue the subject further, by examining the works of the novelist to ascertain how far he had expressed his own passion for outdoor life in his fiction. He found, of course, that there is scarcely one of the novels which does not show evidence of sporting tastes and knowledge:

No other novelist is so at home on the cricket-field. Some time ago Mr. E. B. V. Christian called attention to the fact that Dickens is hopelessly at sea in his description of the match between Muggleton and Dingley Dell, while even the author of 'Tom Brown's School Days' fails on examination. (Both Dickens and Meredith were born in Hampshire, 'the cradle of the game.') Mr. Meredith's triumph is to be found in 'Evan Harrington' in his description of the match between Fallowfield and Beckley, when the Countess de Saldar, a daughter of the great Mel, asks to be instructed 'in your creeket.' In 'Diana of the Crossways' we become spectators of a game at Copsley, and Diana admits, reddening, that Redworth looks well in flannels.

Nothing in 'The Amazing Marriage' remains more in the memory than the amazing honeymoon, in which the Earl of Fleetwood drove his bride straight from the church to a prize-fight. Skepsey's creator evidently has a weakness for the little man's enthusiasm for 'the manly art.' 'You are of opinion,' Skepsey is asked (in 'One of Our Conquerors'), 'that the practice of scientific pugilism offers us compensation for the broken bridge of a nose?' 'In an increase of manly self-esteem,' comes the reply. 'I do,

sir, yes.' Skepsey is valorous, too, with singleticks. Mr. Meredith enjoys rustic encounters—perhaps, as in 'Sandra Belloni,' that he may show the great and amazing magnanimity that is in beer.

In 'Rhoda Fleming' he describes a visit to Epsom, and, in the cosy Pilot Inn, Steeve, the Fairly huntsman, expatiates on fox-hunting:

'To kill 'em in cold blood's beast murder, so it is. What do we do? We give 'em a fair field—a fair field and no favour! We let 'em trust to the instincts Nature, she's given 'em; and don't the old woman know best? If they get away, they win the day. All's open and honest, and above board. Kill your rats and kill your rabbits, but leave foxes to your betters. Foxes are gentlemen. You don't understand? Be hanged if they ain't! I like the old fox, and I don't like to see him murdered and exterminated, but die the death of a gentleman, at the hands of gentlemen——' 'And ladies,' sneered the farmer.

Above all, as evidence of his personal taste, we have his frequent allusions to the Alps in his novels. Surely after his own sweet Surrey he has loved no other part of earth quite so well as the glorious mountain land. He 'cannot seem to do without it,' said Dr. E. Dick in a lengthy article on 'The Alps in George Meredith's Novels,' published in the *Alpine Post* at the beginning of 1908, from which the following passages may be taken:

From 'Richard Feverel' down to 'The Amazing Marriage,' the Alps come in at some point or other of the story, frequently with mighty effects on its further development. With him, they are a sort of Presence, like Providence, or Fate, now a souvenir, now a longing, always beautiful, great, friendly.

Meredith has expressed his idea of the proper use and function of the Alps in 'The Adventures of Harry Richmond'; 'Carry your fever to the Alps, you of minds diseased: not to sit down in sight of them ruminating, for bodily ease and comfort will trick the soul and set you measuring our lean humanity against yonder sublime and infinite; but mount, rack the limbs, wrestle it out among the peaks; taste danger, sweat, earn rest: learn to discover ungrudgingly that haggard fatigue is the fair vision you have run to earth, and that rest is your uttermost reward.'

'The Amazing Marriage' is Mr. Meredith's last novel; it is the one in which the Alps loom larger than in any other. Mr. Meredith's language is always rich and of a beautiful transparency when it is about his loved mountains—his readers know how veiled it can be on other topics—their inspiration must have sounded unambiguous, clear peals of purest metals.

It is this love of open-air exercise, this almost obstreperous



rejoicing in physical strength, this truly British admiration of the animal man—incongruously present with the intensest intellectuality—that made Meredith so modern and an essential Briton, despite his Celtic temperament. He was intellectually the last eminent man of his time to whom the epithet 'British' might be applied; yet in his outdoor character, he was British and of his time. This is but one of the many perplexities he presents, and it has escaped the attention of most of his critics, with one exception, to which reference will be made when we come to consider his literary characteristics, as this is a matter that concerns more the artist than the man.

But there is a gentler side to the open-air Meredith than that of the lusty pedestrian and Rambler of the woodland ways. Like his own 'Melampus' we see him the lover of all the lowly creatures and the simple flowers of the wayside. A charming picture of him as a naturalist is given by the late William Sharp in his chapter on 'The Country of George Meredith,' written for the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1904, and reprinted in 'Literary Geography':

I doubt if any living writer is an intimate with nature-life, with what we mean by 'country-life.' Certainly none can so flash manifold aspect into sudden revelation. Not even Richard Jeffries knew nature more intimately, though he gave his whole thought to what with Mr. Meredith is but a beautiful and ever-varying background. I recollect Grant Allen, himself as keen and accomplished a student of nature as England could show, speaking of this singular intimacy in one who had no pretension to be a man of science. And that recalls to me a delightful afternoon illustrative of what has just been said. Some twelve or fourteen years ago, when Grant Allen (whom I did not then know) was residing at The Nook, Dorking, I happened to be on a few days' visit to Mr. Meredith at his cottage-home near Burford Bridge, a few miles away. On the Sunday morning I walked over the field-ways to Dorking, and found Grant Allen at home. It was a pleasant meeting. We had friends in common, were colleagues on the staff of two London literary 'weeklies,' and I had recently enjoyed favourably reviewing a new book by this prolific and always interesting and delightful writer. So, with these 'credentials,' enhanced by the fact that I came as a guest of his friend Mr. Meredith, I found a cordial welcome, and began there and then with that most winsome personality a friendship which I have always accounted one of the best things that literary life has brought me. After luncheon, Grant Allen said he would accompany me back to Box Hill; as, apart from the pleasure of seeing Mr. Meredith, he particularly wanted to ask him about some disputed point in natural history (a botanical point of some

kind, in connection, I think, with that lovely spring flower, 'Love-in-a-Mist'—for which Mr. Meredith has a special affection, and had and still has fine slips of it in his garden) which he had not been able to observe satisfactorily for himself. I frankly expressed my surprise that a specialist such as my host should wish to consult any other than a colleague on a matter of intimate knowledge and observation; but was assured that there were 'not half-a-dozen men living to whom I would go in preference to Meredith on a point of this kind. He knows the intimate facts of countryside life as very few of us do after the most specific training. I don't know whether he could describe that greenfinch in the wild cherry yonder in the terms of an ornithologist and botanist—in fact, I'm pretty sure he couldn't. But you may rest assured there is no ornithologist living who knows more about the finch of real life than George Meredith does—its appearance, male and female, its song, its habits, its dates of coming and going, the places where it builds, how its nest is made, how many eggs it lays and what-like they are, what it feeds on, what its song is like before and after mating, and when and where it may best be heard, and so forth. As for the wild cherry . . . perhaps he doesn't know much about it technically (very likely he does, I may add! . . . it's never safe with "our wily friend" to take for granted that he doesn't know more about *any* subject than any one else does!) . . . but if any one could say when the first blossoms will appear and how long they will last, how many petals each blossom has, what variations in colour and what kind of smell they have, then it's he and no other better. And as for *how* he would describe that cherry-tree . . . well, you've read "Richard Feverel" and "Love in the Valley," and that should tell you everything!'

Next to the aggressive vitality of Meredith in the prime of his life, which was the subject of marvel to every one who met him before his physical powers had suffered defeat, was his talk: a gift that years and invalidism would seem but to have enhanced. Among the great talkers he must ever have place; for if we may believe all we have been told by his intimates ~~his~~ conversation was always as distinguished as his writing; indeed more brilliant, the play of the eye and face illuminating the quick-flying and ever-changing metaphor in a way impossible to the written word. It is curious to note how every one that has written of Meredith's talk compares his conversation to his writing. We have seen Mr. Justin McCarthy do so in his 'Reminiscences,' and Mr. Fullerton, also. In a privately printed journal Mr. John A. Steuart, author of 'The Minister of State,' writes thus of a meeting with the master:

As he writes, so he talks, brilliantly. Not the tongue alone,

the hearty laugh rings out again and the grey eyes gleam with delight.

He then goes on to tell a story of how, together with the late W. G. Wills and another friend, he went into the Garrick Club during his early days in London; the three determined for one evening to import a little fun into the dull atmosphere of what was then supposed to be the most amusing club in town. They joked and laughed with so much gusto that at length their fellow-members, drowsing over the *Times*, the *Saturday*, and *Punch*, were whipped into life, and one old fogey declared that he had passed quite a lively evening. This little recollection illustrates well the Celtic character of the man: 'But,' he will say with a merry twinkle of his eyes, and dropping voice, 'I am only half Irish, the other half being Welsh. My mother was an Irishwoman; my father came from Wales.' If it be true that all great men owe most to their mothers, then surely the better part of George Meredith is Irish; and certainly he is all Celt.

From a privately-printed record of a meeting with Meredith in the summer of 1900, written by Mr. Coulson Kernahan, I take this vivid impression of his personal characteristics :

Mr. Meredith's portraits (I had well-nigh written the word in the singular, for the one man every aspect of whose face we all wish to know is the one man who has most set his face against letting his face be known to us) give one no idea of his personality. They are likenesses, it is true. The noble shaping and carriage of the head, the commanding presence, the stern beauty of the features, the touch of hauteur, and even of what I may paradoxically call 'gentle severity,' are all to be seen in his portraits. But, compared with Mr. Meredith himself, the best of his portraits is but a beautiful mask.

Never before have I seen a face at once so strong and so sensitive. It seemed carved in cold steel, but nerved like the nostrils of a racehorse. In moments of repose it struck me as strangely melancholy. Then something was said that brought back the smile—a smile that seemed caused by a light upon the face rather than by the play of the features. The lines which, an instant ago, had been set and severe were now all tenderness—stern tenderness, it is true, as of one who had infinite compassion for humanity, but in whose pity no element of weak laxity could enter. Judgment, self-control, and humour, these are the characteristics which to me seemed most plainly writ upon the face of George Meredith. Humour I take to be the very essence of his being—humour that is touched with gaiety, and humour which deepens into sadness; for though the lips of Humour may smile at the sight of human folly, yet when we look into her eyes we see them sad at the thought of human sorrow. The

quality of one's humour is so often a matter of nationality, that some remarks which Mr. Meredith made in my hearing should be recorded. One of our party was, like myself, an Irishman, and when he was introduced to our host, Mr. Meredith exclaimed: 'He bears a name which is surely Irish, and I see, too, that he hath the true Irish eye. Am I mistaken in supposing you to be an Irishman?'

'I am so fortunate,' replied the Irishman.

'You put it well! You put it well!' was Mr. Meredith's comment. 'And I, too, am fortunate in being of Irish blood.'

'Is that so?' replied the Irishman. 'We are proud, indeed, to know that we may claim Mr. George Meredith as a countryman.'

'Ah, but you can only claim the half of me,' was our host's laughing rejoinder. 'My mother was an Irishman, but my father was Welsh.'

*Irishman and*

Mr. Haldane MacFall did a highly-finished pen-portrait of Meredith for the *Canadian Magazine* of May, 1904. We might call it Meredith's laughing portrait, as laughter is the note of it:

George Meredith faces life a mighty laugh, glad to be alive, glad to walk the fresh, sweet earth, glad to breathe the south-west winds that blow health into the lungs of the race of which he is so proud a being, glad of this splendid wayfaring amid the adventures that make up the journey of life. And what a mighty laugh it is! Right from the deep chest—setting one chuckling at the very merriment of it. The finely-chiselled nose, with the sharp, pugnacious tilt at the end, betrays eagerness for the duel of wit, eagerness to know all, eagerness to be at the very front of life. The leaping energy that lurks behind the dreamy eyelids finds interest in everything. Meredith sees life too exquisitely to be afraid of being accused of regarding small things. His pointed grey beard gives the suggestion to the strong, clean-shaped head of an admiral of our day. He is of the type of the man of action. To hear Meredith talk of the coming youngsters of to-day, asking his keen questions about their personal attainments, their appearance, their promise, his nervous face all alert to know, is to be in the feverish company of an eager youth.

His feet no longer pace the long walk up the grassy slope of the majestic hill that sweeps from his doors upwards into the clouds, but the keen brain is as passionately inquisitive of the world as in the years when his youth took him blithely walking along its ways. There is in the bearing of the man a distinction, a splendour of manners, a perfection of the carriage of the body, as of a great man saying and doing the simple thing with an air that realises the word aristocrat in human shape more vividly than in any living man. He gives a more profound sense of greatness than any one I have ever met.

Mr. Henry W. Nevinston is a journalist of that select class to which Meredith would certainly have belonged had he continued his connection with the craft: a wandering scholar, ever afield for new interests to describe, let the times make for peace or war. In his peaceful and bookish days in England he has had the privilege of several meetings with Meredith at Box Hill, and no one has portrayed the features of the novelist with such cameo clearness of detail as Mr. Nevinston in certain contributions to the press. To the *Book Monthly* of March, 1904, he contributed an article, reprinted in 'Books and Personalities,' from which I take these graphic and noteworthy passages:

It is essentially a Greek head. It might have been modelled upon those statues of mature and powerful manhood which, in the museums of the world, are now vaguely labelled 'a poet' or 'an orator.' If it is a poet's head, it is a Greek poet's. There is no trace of the weakness, the conscious melancholy, or petulant emotionalism which, unhappily, have been too often associated with the modern idea of poetic appearance. It is the head of a man who, like Sophocles, could have commanded a fleet as easily as write a tragedy, and as well. When we see it, we cease to wonder that the Athenians should have expected their great poet to do both as a matter of course. It is the symbol of a tempered intellect, in which there is no flaw of softness or languor—the intellect of a man, and even of a man of action.

There are men of letters who wear a shut-up, indoor look. Their faces are like the windows of a sick chamber; we dimly divine the invalid and delicately-curtained soul within. But the very look of Meredith tells of the open sky, where the sun marches, and the winds pipe, and the thunderclouds mass their battalions.

His is the head of an orator, too—a Greek orator, like Pericles, whose words the historian might have enregistered as an everlasting possession. The great mouth opens almost four-square. It is an Attic mask, a magician's cave. A spirit seems to be speaking, not with it, but through it, and on a broad scale of sound comes the voice, full, unhesitating, and distinct to the last letter, like the voice of one who has spoken much among the waves. We feel that, as Mendelssohn said of Goethe, he should shout like a hundred warriors. Perhaps his slowly increasing deafness had made his utterance even more remarkable when last I saw him; but in earlier days also his words fell rather in superb monologue than in conversation.

There is no effort about the language; the great sentences are thrown out with lavish opulence—the careless opulence of nature at her kindest. There is no pausing for figures, wit, or epigrams; they come of themselves, as water follows water from a spring. It is the style of his books. There is the same concentration, the same



MEREDITH IN HIS DONKEY CHAIR WITH HIS DOG SANDY



fulness, and the same irony; but it is all simpler because more unstudied; and whereas some pages of the books have become difficult and dark, the effect of the spoken word when first it is uttered is wholly illumination and delight.

Mr. T. P. O'Connor's thumb-nail sketch does not help greatly but is interesting for its reference to the portrait by the Duchess of Rutland, which, so far as I can ascertain, has never been published in any form :

He is a noticeable man wherever you may see him. Not very tall; not very robust in appearance—rather of the thin and wiry type of physique—with a certain thinness of face, you have to realise the beauties of his eyes before you understand how much of his genius is revealed by his exterior. The only likeness of him I ever saw which gave you a good idea of the wistfulness, the eeriness, and the uniqueness of the face and the expression was that done by the Marchioness of Granby—as she was, the Duchess of Rutland as she now is. The beautiful white hair; the short but beautiful beard; but, above all, that strange, wistful eerie expression of the whole face—all this is brought out with wonderful fidelity and, at the same time, imagination.

There is a vivid touch of actuality in this little pen-picture of Meredith written by M. Charles Legras, the French critic, for the *Journal des Débats* in 1900, and reprinted in 'Chez nos Contemporains d'Angleterre' :

When we enter, Mr. Meredith raises his tall figure from a roomy easy-chair that is stuffed with cushions, and supports himself feebly with two walking-sticks, his hands twitching and trembling: like Daudet he has been struck by ataxy. Over his forehead, square and very wide, falls a mass of hair cut *à la chien*; the profile of the face is sharply cut, the eyes of a dark grey, suffused at times by tenderness. His mouth is large and he speaks with much use of gesture. This silhouette of the great writer at the end of his career appears to me to harmonise with his works—long, unrestful, nervous, but still dignified of mien all the same.

The late Moncure D. Conway in his autobiography makes a brief mention of Meredith's conversation. 'In the few times that I have met him,' he writes, 'he was delightful, his imagination putting out his fancy to represent it in sparkling talk that could hardly prepare one for the depth and passion of his poetry. For I always love Meredith's poetry better than his novels, these impressing me as too often containing involved intimations of vital things in order to escape the deletions of Mrs. Grundy, to whom all proofs



must be submitted.' A curious judgment on the novels, but a just comparison of the talk and the poetry.

Mr. W. T. Stead wrote a brilliant character sketch of him in the *Review of Reviews* for March, 1904, in which this passage occurs :

'People talk about me,' he said, 'as if I were an old man. I do not feel old in the least. On the contrary,' he went on, in his humorous, sardonic fashion, 'I do not believe in growing old, and I do not see any reason why we should ever die. I take as keen an interest in the movement of life as ever, I enter into the passions of youth, and I watch political affairs and intrigues of parties with the same keen interest as of old. I have seen the illusion of it all, but it does not dull the zest with which I enter into it all, and I hold more firmly than ever to my faith in the constant advancement of the race.

'My eyes are as good as ever they were, only for small print I need to use spectacles. It is only in my legs that I feel weaker. I can no longer walk, which is a great privation to me. I used to be a keen walker; I preferred walking to riding; it sent the blood coursing to the brain, and besides, when I walked, I could go through the woods and footpaths, which I could not have done if I had ridden—now I can only walk about my own garden. It is a question of nerves. If I touch anything, however slightly, I am afraid that I shall fall—that is my only loss, my walking days are over.'

Meredith was then seventy-six, and, as we have seen, his optimism was undimmed when, four years later, the interviewers were inducing the aged master of Flint Cottage to speak to them on the last subject he would have chosen—himself! It is worthy of note, by the way, that there seems to be no evidence of moodiness on the part of Meredith as a talker. About many great men stories are told which would suggest some degree of affectation and even boorishness. Tennyson and Carlyle are often accused of conduct to friends or chance acquaintances that was scarcely in keeping with good manners; Meredith never. There is just one anecdote, which I believe to be authentic, hinting at the possibility of his fountain of talk being sealed at times. A lady who had friends in Surrey who were on terms of some intimacy with the novelist was greatly charmed on one occasion when visiting there to find that Meredith was to be one of the guests at dinner. She prepared herself for a rich ingathering of his celebrated flowers of witty talk, but he was singularly silent throughout the visit, and the only Meredithian phrase the lady could carry away with her was his remark, when

reaching across his neighbour for the salt, 'Excuse the pic-nic stretch.'

The first 'interviewer' who sought out the sage at Box Hill was, as we have noted, a literary journalist from Boston. Among the last were two Americans, and in both cases the results were interesting enough to bear some record here. Mr. Charles Frederic Goss does not give a date to his visit, but it was most likely in the summer of 1907, certainly before 1908, as his little account of 'A Visit to George Meredith' was published in the *Book News Monthly* of Philadelphia for March, 1908. After describing the oft-pictured scene of Flint Cottage and the famous chalet, he says:

It was with a sort of reverence that I entered this sequestered spot and rang the bell. An elderly housekeeper answered my summons, took my letter, and left me standing on the steps.

'Well, show him in,' I heard a loud voice say at last—not just as hospitably as I could wish; but a good deal more so than I had expected, from what I had been told of its owner's solitary life.

Entering a narrow hall I passed into one of the brightest and most cheerful sitting-rooms that I had ever seen. The morning sun was shining through the window and falling upon the back of the big, grey head of the old man, turning his hair to a silver aureole. Laying down his morning paper, my host extended his hand, and said, with a deaf man's raucous voice, 'I am always glad to see Americans; among them I have found some of my best and most abiding friends.' And then, without giving me an instant's chance to offer my apologies, he launched into a charming disquisition on the beauties of the region where he lived. From this as a starting-point he began swinging about a vast circle of observations on affairs and men, with the ease and power of a great ship coming around an immense curve.

Here are fragments of his talk for those who care to hear them second-hand:

'I do not produce any longer; or rather, only verse and not for print. I am getting too old. The imagination cools, you know. And then the veterans ought to leave the field to younger men!

'I take a hopeful view of the progress of civilisation, in general; but not so much of Great Britain, at least in the near future. She has been too greedy for power, empire, wealth. She has seized more than she can hold and administer.

'The trouble with society is—the lack of conversational power. Card-playing has stultified, or stupefied, its members.

'The literary outlook seems to me encouraging. There may not be any first-class writers; but the second and third classes are full. There is a great elevation of the rank and file of those who are making books. Multitudes of the very same people who, a few

years ago, could not write at all, are writing now with skill, if not with art. In your own country there are many novelists who deserve all praise, among them, Gertrude Atherton, Edith Wharton, and my dear friend Weir Mitchell, a prince of men.

'President Roosevelt is a splendid fellow, but has made a mistake about spelling! He is too *absolutely* democratic. Democracy is good in politics, but bad in literature. The roots of literature are buried so deeply in the past that they cannot be rudely pulled up. He tries in vain to play the school-master. We need castigation, and the man with the birch-rod will come; but the President is not that man, nor his big stick that birch-rod! It must be a colossal man and a colossal stick.'

It requires a great deal of self-denial to leave such a man before you are ejected by the valet or the coachman! I went unaided, but most reluctantly.

There is a characteristic American 'snap' about this little episode that seems to endow Meredith himself with a touch of that Transatlantic quality; but, as the interview was evidently of the shortest and the veteran contrived to say so much and touch so many topics, the little account is valuable as indicating the ready flow of his ideas and the quick-rising flood of his talk at his advanced age.

The other American interviewer was a lady, Miss Catharine Welch, who visited him about his eightieth birthday and wrote a short sketch of her visit in the *Daily Chronicle*, from which the following passages are taken:

'Your being an American,' said he, 'gives you a sure road to my favour. I like Americans, and they have always liked me over there.

'What a man's living to be eighty means,' he went on, 'is, of course, that he is either greedily tenacious of life or else that he is so insignificant the fates have passed him by. . . . It is a misfortune to live to be eighty. A man's life ought to finish when he is five-and-sixty. He must stop working then, or else do work that is inferior. People will praise it at the time and write articles about it, but posterity will know better and see its weakness. You can't fool posterity. . . . No; when a man stops working, nature is finished with him, and when nature is finished with him he ought to go.'

At the conclusion of this gloomy little speech Mr. Meredith chuckled happily, and I realised that he was amusing himself by saying something he did not altogether mean.

He returned to the subject of America. 'I wish I had gone there when I was younger. I had many invitations. I suppose they would have given a lot of dinners to me, and,' he added quaintly, 'the mass of refection would have served to carry out my



*Portrait of the Author of the*

### THE LAST SKETCH OF MERFETH.

From a sketch by the well known French artist, M. Noël Dorville, who visited England some months before the novelist's death and made a series of sketches of distinguished persons for an *Entente Cordiale* Album issued in France.



theory and to remove me before I was sixty-five. I suppose, too, I should have had to make speeches. I never spoke in public in my life. I can't talk standing up. The formality of it kills my ideas and my legs betray my brains. But if people will let me speak to them from my chair, I am very happy to talk—and I never stop.'

Mr. Meredith gave me some information as to the modern writers he found most interesting—Americans in particular.

Amongst the novelists he likes Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Atherton. 'They both write a good, flowing style,' said he. Mr. Henry James he mentioned also. The two men are great friends, and Mr. Meredith spoke of the younger writer as 'my dear Henry James.'

It appears that the physical labour of writing has grown tiresome to him, though he still writes letters to his intimate friends and allows himself now and then to be plagued by his admirers into putting his name in the front of his books. He tells, by the way, very amusing stories about the methods adopted by these enthusiasts to secure his autograph, accompanied by 'a few words.'

He has sometimes tried to dictate. 'But,' said he, 'to write novels you must put your whole self into them. I found dictating therefore to be impossible, and have never been able to get beyond the fourth or fifth chapter.'

In the *Chronicle* of the same day there was a little word-portrait of Meredith from an unknown hand. It may be quoted, not only for its graphic truth, but as an example of the way in which the mannerisms of the master are unconsciously adopted by those who write about him. It was the same with Stevenson. There is not one of the many critics who have written much about Stevenson but makes use of his 'disengage.' This was a favourite word of his, used in such wise as, let us say: A striking and original personality 'disengages' itself from the mass of anecdote gathered about Meredith. The *Chronicle* writer got his 'leaps at you, ringing like a bell,' nowhere but from Meredith:

You catch the flash of that eye immediately you see him, whether that be indoors, in his arm-chair, or out of doors, in his donkey-chaise. The hair and beard are white, and they suggest the patriarch, and indeed Mr. Meredith has always been a prophet. The face is furrowed, too, but youth—perennial youth—gleams from the eyes. And then Mr. Meredith's voice—it has the very sound and melody of youth. It has a great-heartedness which is captivating and infective—it leaps at you, ringing like a bell. To hear Mr. Meredith talk is to recall Gladstone's rich voice, and do not other points occur to one as linking the two men?

Some notice must be taken of Meredith's political convictions, and here seems to be a fitting place since his opinions on affairs

devoted to this book of verse was that by the late William Sharp in the *Scottish Art Review*, February 4, 1889. Sharp begins with a very reasonable denunciation of that criticism of Meredith's poetry which seeks to establish such distinctions as 'a writer of poetry, who has never written a poem,' or 'a great poet without music,' and with the other sort that strives to establish likeness or contrast between this or that poet and Meredith. He has no difficulty, of course, in illustrating how gloriously musical Meredith may be—quoting 'that most exquisite couplet':

Maiden still the morn is; and strange she is, and secret;  
Strange her eyes; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells—

nor in showing that he can write a poem as well as poetry, that he has concrete beauty not less than visions of the abstract, and equally how foolish it is to compare him with others instead of judging him by his own standards, the only true way of criticism. Applying himself to the poems of 1888 in particular, William Sharp sets forth his views in these words:

In 'A Reading of Earth' there is, it would seem to be necessary to say, ample proof that the quality of music is in no abeyance. It must of course be remembered that Mr. Meredith is not content to make a sweet sound about nothing; if he did so desire, it would probably be of little avail, for it is undeniable that his poetic work does not in the main possess a certain charm, that of rhythmic spontaneity. He is not a singer for the sake of singing, so much as a poet for the sake of poetry. There are thoughts and aspirations which he prefers to give forth in verse, concepts of abstract, renderings and interpretations of concrete beauty for which he cannot adequately or even aptly find expression in prose; but the passion of song, for song's sake, irrespective of its significance, does not seem to be his. It is difficult to say what is and what is not his dominant impulse; for, above all writers of the day, he has his falcon of poetry as much as his steed of prose in magic restraint—and we may be sure that so conscientious and so thorough an artist does not practise renunciation unless to some high end of art. . . . That Mr. Meredith would have attained as relatively high, or higher, a rank as a poet as he has done of a novelist, had he devoted himself absolutely to the art which he indubitably loves so well, and has, indeed, long so loyally served, I feel well assured. . . .

It will be safe to predict that few readers of this book will repeat the echo-cry about lack of music. Music of utterance, happy epithets, and felicities of selection where natural description is concerned, abound. 'The South-Western' is the finest of poems to the true lord of all the winds that blow. 'Mother to Babe,' 'Woodland Peace,' 'Outer and Inner,' with its sweet complexities of rhyme



of the  
At the

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# THE LITTLE ENGINEER

It was a bright and sunny day  
The sun shone on the water

—A young fellow  
Young fellow  
Had you a little

With a fresh breeze  
On the water  
The little engine

And the little engine  
And the little engine  
And the little engine





and metre, and the 'Dirge in Woods,' are among the most delightful of the shorter poems. The last-named was written, and in an extended form published, some nineteen years ago; and it was, as Rossetti himself told me, the direct progenitor of his lyric, 'Cloud Confines.' 'The Thrush in February' is a poem of forty octosyllabic quatrains, and is worthy of the haunting fascination of its title. In 'The Appeasement of Demeter' a novel and suggestive phrase is given to an old theme, with an effect, upon the present writer, as of something definitely decorative, of an actual fresco, or heroic design in tapestry. Not that it lacks the vitality of a living thing; it might well be called the 'Joy of Life.' A remarkable poem follows it. Entitled 'Earth and a Wedded Woman,' it deals with the vague physical experience of a child of nature, as she lies on her bed and thinks dreamily of her long-absent lover while she listens to the pouring of the incessant rain. But the finest poem in the volume is the superb 'Hymn to Colour,' which, with 'Love in the Valley,' I should rank foremost among the sensuous poems of George Meredith. There is not a line that is not exquisite in beauty.

Save for a notice in the *Saturday Review*, 'Poems: The Empty Purse, with Odes to the Comic Spirit, to Youth in Memory, and Verses,' appeared in the winter of 1892 without awakening any interest, and 'Jump-to-Glory Jane,' included in this volume, also appeared separately in 1892, lavishly illustrated by Lawrence Housman, and 'edited and arranged' (whatever that may imply) by the late Harry Quilter, who had first given the poem to the world in the pages of his *Universal Review*, October, 1889. The *Times*, October 20, 1892, seems to have been the only journal that paid the least attention to this remarkable poem and the no less remarkable manner of its publication. But when the poem appeared in the *Universal* it would seem to have occasioned some considerable discussion, to which the editor refers in his interesting 'Word on the Birth, History, Illustrations and First Reception of "Jane."' Although this note is bibliographical rather than critical, its intrinsic interest, and the two letters of Meredith's to Quilter, fully justify its quotation here. It is as follows:

When this poem first appeared, in the *Universal Review*, it shared the fate which has attended many of Mr. Meredith's novels; the critics were puzzled, the public doubtful. Demands for explanation flowed in upon me by every post; clergymen remonstrated: not very clear as to their grievance these last, but 'doubtful of the tendency,' a happy phrase which has in its time covered as many sins as charity. The very artist I wished to illustrate the poem not only began, but continued, to make excuse, and finally confessed

that he could not do justice to the verses, and would rather not undertake them. Somehow this got abroad, and certain journals made themselves merry over the artist's incapability to understand the text submitted to him. Then the journalistic word went forth that this poem was 'a satire on the Salvation Army,' and as such it was gravely characterised in several papers. 'Forced, feeble and vulgar,' was this 'tedious doggerel' according to one authority; 'silly and incomprehensible' growled a second; 'scarcely likely to add to the author's reputation' sighed a third, and so on throughout the list. If a kind word was spoken of 'Jane' here and there, it was not written; my very publisher asked me privately what it meant, and friends and relations looked grave; discreetly avoided the subject, as one which was undoubtedly painful.

And yet they were wrong—and will have to 'own up.' Friends and relations, critics and all, must one day confess that this is a good piece of work, and a not incomprehensible one. It is, however, no 'satire on the Salvation Army,' and has no connection with that estimable but unpleasant organisation; and if it be a satire at all, which must be left to the perception of the reader, the poem is also, as Meredith calls it, 'one of the pictures of our England.'

Quilter deems it a 'sly *reductio ad absurdum* to the doctrine which Kingsley set such store by: the connection between physical health and religious feeling.' Meredith himself, writing from Box Hill, August 15, 1889, with regard to illustrating the poem, says:

Whoever does it should be warned against giving burlesque outlines. It is a grave narration of events in English country (? life). Jane, though a jumping, is a thoughtful, woman. She has discovered that the circulation of the blood is best brought about by a continual exercise, and conduces to happy sensations, which are to her as the being of angels in her frame. She has wistful eyes in a touching, but bony face.

In a second letter, dated September 10, 1889, the poet declares Mary Ann Girling, the originator of the 'Shakers,' as a prototype of his 'Jane,' and there it may be said that to be true to life is to be satirical. He writes:

Yes, they are a satire, but one of the pictures of our England as well. Remember Mrs. Girling and her following, and the sensations of Jane, with her blood at the spin with activity, warranted her feeling of exaltation. An English middle-class, Blavitzky maniac would also be instructive, though less pathetic than poor Jane.

Mr. G. M. Trevelyan considers 'The Empty Purse' one of the poems which had better been cast in prose.

Perhaps the finest criticism of the 'Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History,' which were reprinted from *Cosmopolis* and published in separate form in 1898, is Mr. Owen Seaman's delightful parody, 'At the Sign of the Cock,' quoted in another chapter of the present work. But there is a passage in an excellent review by 'A. M.' in the *Bookman*, December, 1898, which I take to be from the pen of Miss Alice Macdonell, that accurately touches the later affectation of the pretentious Meredithians, and does justice to the merits without turning a blind eye on the poetic demerits of these 'Odes.' This critic observes :

It is, indeed, a strange irony of fate that the lucid genius of France should be sung in such desperately tortured and turgid strain. True, one hears very little of the difficulty of the poems from the critics, but that is because Mr. Meredith and all his ways are now accepted. Every cultured person is expected to understand him as a matter of course. But I will make bold to say it is a very hard student of the 'Odes' who has come to an approximate comprehension of certain passages, and I am not convinced that the difficulty arises from anything worthier than the common source of such difficulties—a defective expression and a carelessness of beauty. The new affectation of understanding all is hardly less absurd than the old one of failing to understand anything. So we must in honesty speak not of the whole, but of parts.

There is one ode to which this criticism does not apply—that to France in 1870. It has been already published. Perhaps some will recall it for its memorable line—

By their great memories the gods are known.

It is a fine poem finely fashioned. No son of her womb has sung a higher song to her, nor one to make her wince more wholesomely in certain moments.

In the fine study, 'Mr. Meredith's Poetry,' in the *Times*, February 13, 1908, I find this reference to his political odes :

His magnificent political odes have recalled the great days of Shelley's 'Liberty,' Wordsworth's 'Sonnets,' and Coleridge's 'France.' They unite the youth's ardour and intense hold on the present with the seer's vision brooding over time and eternity. There has been nothing like them in the last hundred years. Tennyson was indeed the ideal voice of English political wisdom, but these issues did not greatly move him; and Mr. Kipling has kept in the main to an altogether lower level. But these glorious French odes seem to bear us up away from the dusky lights of earth, which are all the politician has to guide himself by, into the

very splendour of the heavens. They quiver with sympathy, they burn with righteousness, they even have at times the stately motion of their own poet's 'army of unalterable law.' No poet has ever come more triumphantly out of the difficult field of contemporary politics. And there is another thing—the history the poets have given us has generally been more poetical than historical. That has not been the case with Mr. Meredith. There is no sketch of Napoleon in existence that contains so much of the essential truth about him as Mr. Meredith's ode. Everything that Napoleon was to France, and France to him, of curse and blessing, is there, nothing extenuated and nothing set down in malice, however sternly one-sided the balance ultimately falls. The only criticism to make on it is that it is perhaps a little too tumultuous; we are everywhere in the whirlwind and the storm; there is too little of the delightful ease of great poetry; but then it may be that that mighty ghost is not to be raised without the whirlwind's help.

Meredith's last book of verse, and his last work of all, 'A Reading of Earth,' published in the summer of 1901, had far less notice at the hands of the critics, and was not so warmly received in any quarter, as his first book, 'Poems,' published exactly half-a-century before it, yet Mr. Trevelyan makes more references to it in illustration of Meredith's philosophy than to almost any other of his works. It is essentially a book of philosophic poetry, and if at times the philosopher elbows out the poet altogether, it still contains in such fine poems as 'The Night Walk,' 'The Test of Manhood,' and many others, a firm and vigorous declaration of the poet's unswerving faith in the high destiny of Earth's children; the note sounds clear and true after fifty years of enunciation and three and seventy years of life.

Before quitting the subject of Meredith's poetry, there remain a few characteristics to be noted that have been passed untouched both in the general view with which this chapter opened and in the particular references to his various books. On the appearance of 'Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life,' for instance, the *Spectator*, October 15, 1887, printed a very able article on 'An Inarticulate Poet,' that dealt very justly with an aspect of Meredith's poetry which, once thoroughly appreciated, enables the reader, without surrendering any degree of his admiration for the poet, to understand him even in his so-called obscurities and to realise his greatness when he fails; to understand, in a word, that his partial failures have very often to be regarded as partial successes. I do not purpose following the *Spectator* writer in the detail of his





*Along the road he had his home, in other folk*

#### THE BEGGAR'S SOLILOQUY

Now this, to my notion, is pleasant cheer,

To lie all alone on a ragged heath  
Where your nose isn't stuff'd for bones or beef  
But a peat-fire smells like a garden beneath,

The cottagers bustle about the door,

And the girl at the window ties her strings,  
She's a dish for a man who's a mind to be poor,  
Lord! women are such expensive things.

—*THE MERCHANT.*

criticism, with which few would be inclined to cavil, but his general observations on the subject of articulateness in poetry are certainly worthy of consideration. He writes :

'The Song is to the singer, and comes back most to him,' says somewhere Walt Whitman; and who can doubt that this in reality is the characteristic of the true poet? His creations are, and must be, more to him than to the rest of the world, for they are the outcome of his own emotions and of his own sensations, though not necessarily of his own experience. But whoever yet could clothe in words the whole of what he felt,—did not leave perhaps the most essential and compelling sense within him unexpressed? But if this is the necessary characteristic of the poet, it is also his chief danger. Not seldom the song is so much to the singer, that he is indifferent what it may be to the world. His instinct very likely tells him truly that his poem is good, for it has sprung straight from some deep well of emotion. He knows, too, that the work in which he has laboured to enshrine it, is wrought with the fine gold of imagination and rhetoric. He forgets that to the world at large it expresses nothing. The emotion of which it was the outcome was either essentially inarticulate or only articulate on one side, and that side he has omitted to show. The judgment of the really great and successful singer is, then, as important as his power to feel and to sing. He must select as well as refine, and must for ever be stepping outside his own work and judging it as from the stranger's standpoint. Only by the use of this judgment which can choose between the expressible and unexpressible, can the poet be articulate, be the singer of songs that the world can understand. Without the power to be articulate no poet can win the highest praise.

But though this is so, it would be far too much to deny altogether the name of poet to a writer because of the frequent absence of articulateness in his verse. Indeed, were we to do so in the present generation, we should banish from the ranks of the poets more than one writer whose name is, in every sense, essentially poetic. It is of the verse of such a partially inarticulate poet that we desire to speak here. As a novelist Mr. George Meredith has won, and deservedly won, a very high reputation among, if not the largest, at least the most thoughtful class of readers. As a poet, however, he has received no adequate recognition. This may, we believe, be accounted for by the fact stated above—the greater part of his verse is inarticulate. It is in no sense meaningless; it is simply unable to say what it desires to say. Take as an example the last stanza from 'Bellerophon' :

Lo, this is he in whom the surgent springs  
Of recollections richer than our skies  
To feed the flow of tuneful strings,  
Show but a pool of scum for shooting flies.



How few are those who could read this and not be repelled! Yet what pleasure do they miss who are repelled, who never learn to know the other side of Mr. George Meredith's writings, and to love the noble chords of music he sometimes strikes! It is, then, our intention here not to dwell upon what is harsh, crude, unintelligible and pedantic in Mr. Meredith's verse, but to show instead what a pure and lucid strain of lyric sweetness, what floods of passionate eloquence, are to be found side by side with his crudest and most repellent verse.

I do not follow the *Spectator's* critic further, for the simple reason that he says nothing else which has not already been said and is perfectly familiar to every reader.

It is, I hope I may say, a merit of the present work that no timidity has been shown in admitting every sincere opinion of its subject; 'both sides of the question' have ever been kept in view, with the result that no adverse criticism of the poetry or the prose of Meredith can disturb the equanimity of his convinced and fortified admirers, just as no extravagant laudation of his art can make them forget that he has his great faults as well as his great qualities.

Mr. Arthur Symons is one of the soundest critics of Meredith's poetry, a warm admirer, but a candid friend. For a general view of the poetry up to the year 1887, no better exposition could be wished than Mr. Symons's article in the *Westminster Review*, for September of that year. Mr. Symons, like many another, is puzzled by the joy of the poet's earth-worship and the sombreness of his poetry of human life. 'These two elements, Nature as a source of joy and healing, Life a tragic tangle, form between them the substance or the basis of Mr. Meredith's poetry,' he observes. But to explain this he does not attempt. We may find some sidelight from other minds that will help us to understand this when we come to examine the criticism of Meredith's philosophy. Here, of course, our main business has been with that aspect of his poetry which concerns the art of verse and neither philosophy nor psychology, except in a merely incidental way. The conclusion to which Mr. Symons's study of the poetry brings him is admirably expressed in the following passage, with which his charmingly written and closely reasoned article ends; it might stand for the last word on Meredith the poet:

Uncertain we cannot but hold Mr. Meredith's art to be; and it is this, and this alone, that can at all render doubtful his claim to a very high place among contemporary poets. He has imagina-

tion, passion, real and rare harmony, varied gifts—gifts utterly wanting to several poets we might name, whose possession of just the one gift in which he is lacking has allowed them to far outstrip him in the popular estimation, and may do much to foist them permanently into a place above him. . . . Over too much of his harvest-field an enemy, an enemy within, ~~has sowed tares.~~ As in the parable, wheat and tares grow together; there is no plucking out the weeds without carrying the good corn with them; and we must leave it to Time the careful reaper, the reaper who never errs though he is long in reaping, to gather together first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them; but to gather the wheat into his barn.

Mr. Laurie Magnus in his noteworthy article on 'The Succession of Mr. Meredith,' contributed to the *Fortnightly*, December, 1907, has some apt observations on the technique of the poetry, which may help the student to a nicer appreciation of Meredith's efforts to extract from the English language a greater service in suggestiveness than any other poet has attempted. Mr. Magnus writes:

He has been regarded too long as a poet apart from the poetic line, and something of this neglect has been due to the common confusion between thought and style. The progress of poetry is not marked by steps in the excellence of *technique*. Its true progress lies in its successive and successful powers of assimilating, interpreting, and representing to the age in which the poet lives the new experience of life which is gathered in his age, and which is added to the accumulating evidence of God to man. His instrument—a feeble one—is language, and, as the experience is more novel and the evidence more unexpected, so his instrument proves less serviceable and malleable. There are even occasions when the commonest currency of speech has to be called in to be re-coined, in order to remove its trite appearance, and to repair its expressiveness. The imperfection of language as a medium of truth is remedied in course of years. It repeats, in similar circumstances, differing only in degree, the history of its original development. All this is familiar enough, but, till recently, it has not been applied to the criticism of Mr. Meredith's poetry; and, thus applied, it explains his makeshift with an adjective where no substantive exists—'wing our green to wed our blue' is a typical example out of many; it explains his use of 'Earth,' and, partially, his disuse of 'God'; and it explains the cause, if not altogether the result, of the obscurity of such poems as his 'Hymn to Colour.' There he is adapting an old language to the requirements of a late philosophy; and, while we are certain that the instrument will ultimately be sharpened to its new use, we are grateful for the rough-hewn thoughts, which it has been forced meanwhile to shape by the

invincible purpose of the poet's forward imagination. And often the purpose conquers; the instrument and the design are at one. Sometimes in a lonely line, sometimes, here and there, in a stanza, at other times in whole poems, the expression is equal to the thought, and truth flashes in our eyes. Take, for instance, the last magnificent revelation of 'Meditation under Stars' :

A wonder edges the familiar face :  
 She wears no more that robe of printed hours :  
 Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.

As to the veiled verdict of Time on the poetry of George Meredith, I find myself reverting to the most suggestive *Times* article, to which attention has been given above; for there the writer strikes the truth concerning the relative values of prose and poetry in their endurance of the test of Time :

Every one knows his novels, but only the few who go to seek literature wherever they can find it have much acquaintance with his poetry. Yet poetry has, on the whole, proved so much the most lasting of the forms of creative human speech that it may well be that 'Love in the Valley' may be remembered at least as long as 'The Egoist.' 'Rasselas' had in its day many more readers than 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'; and Sidney was long thought of as the author of the 'Arcadia,' and not as the writer of the Sonnets to Stella; but in each case, for us to-day, the verse has a stronger life than the prose. The fact, perhaps, is more that the pleasurable excitement afforded by metre, and the higher mood in which poetry is usually written, carry us into an atmosphere in which we are less conscious of changed fashions in thought and expression than we inevitably are in prose. There is in poetry an element of strangeness which makes us ready to welcome a certain unlikeness to our ways of speech and our own point of view. But that is not so in prose. The fancies which are delightful in Elizabethan verse are only tolerable in the contemporary prose; the conceits which we endure in Donne or Cowley would not be endured in any writer who was not a poet. Perhaps the truth is that, with contemporaries, prose has a better chance than verse, other things being equal; with posterity, other things being equal, verse has a better chance than prose.

It may be idle to prophesy, but, with all its faults, there are in Meredith's poetry certain elements of vitality which will enable it to endure, and perhaps to find an infinitely wider range of life in the minds of men, when much of his prose will have been forgotten. He may be, in a certain sense, 'an inarticulate poet,' but only for the reason Mr. Laurie Magnus has explained in his apt

allusion to 'the invincible purpose of the poet's forward imagination.' For this reason, apart from others, is he likely to prove articulate to following generations in an immensely greater degree than to his own, and chiefly through the medium of his poetry. We may let the last words on Meredith the poet be these favourite lines of his own :

Full lasting is the song though he  
The singer passes ; lasting, too,  
For souls not lent in usury,  
The rapture of the forward view.

## XII

### THE COMIC SPIRIT

THE Spirit of Comedy broods over Meredith in all his writings. He is ever conscious of her presence 'overhead.' The marvel is that, so inspired, he never attempted writing for the stage, which, as he assures us, 'would be a corrective of a too-encrusted scholarly style, into which some great ones fall at times.' Often in the course of his narrative we seem to detect a yearning after stage effect; the mind of the novelist is asking him how this or that scene he is depicting would 'go' in an acted comedy. He is fond, too, of theatrical similes; 'The Egoist' he calls 'a comedy in narrative,' and the stormy love-story of Lassalle and Fraulein von Doënniges he turns into fiction as 'The Tragic Comedians,' while his stories abound in passages cast in terms of the stage instead of those of ordinary prose narrative. It might be wrong, however, if we concluded from this that the real tragedy of Meredith's literary career was an unrealised ambition to transfer his personages to the stage. Dickens's passion for the theatre was something quite different. Most human beings go through a period of life during which they are fascinated by the glamour of the theatre; some never outlive it; and Dickens was in the latter category. But we have no reason for supposing that Meredith was ever in the first condition. He shows no inkling of love for the theatre in the sense of the 'stage-struck' Dickens. It is again an affair of the intellect; the Greek theatre, with its chorus and 'gods,' unlike those of the hearty gallery, are more to his mind. His notion of the stage is thus seldom, if ever, the concrete institution of our time, but rather an academic abstraction in some sort; a mirrored memory of the Athenian. If this be so, it is not surprising that he never seriously attempted writing for the stage; certainly his method is the antithesis of the purely dramatic, and we cannot imagine that success would have awaited him as a playwright. Yet he is an essential dramaturge in his attitude to his personages; he watches over them and directs them; he plays chorus to them with more gusto than h

does anything else; but he does not steadily advance his drama in the spoken words of his characters; they may be quick with life, but it is not always, nor often, dramatic life. Withal, Molière is his greatest master, and if Meredith has never given a comedy to the stage, Comedy has given Meredith to literature. Nor is this to be regretted.

Mr. Humphrey Ward has a very just note on this in his 'Reign of Queen Victoria,' when he remarks:

Nature designed George Meredith for a great writer of serious comedy, a compeer of Congreve. The incompatibility of literary merit with dramatic success in our day drove him to the novel, which he peopled with the characters of the stage. He paints and dresses for artificial light; hence the apparent want of nature, which disappears on a fair consideration of his aim. No modern novelist demands so much intellect from his readers or gives them so much of his own. What pith and sparkle are to him, an extraordinary delicacy of observation is to Thomas Hardy, who has made more of a few square miles of Dorsetshire than many other novelists have been able to make of the great metropolis.

How vital has been the influence of the comic spirit on the novelist we may judge, not merely by its abundant evidence in his works, or by his splendid ode 'To the Comic Spirit,' but by his only essay of importance being that 'On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit,' delivered at the London Institution, February 1, 1877. A few brief passages from the revised edition of the lecture, as published in book-form in 1897, will put us in possession of Meredith's main ideas of Comedy before we proceed to consider them in the light of criticism. Let us first note these distinctions and their personal applications:

You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes.

If you detect the ridicule, and your kindliness is chilled by it, you are slipping into the grasp of Satire.

If instead of falling foul of the ridiculous person with a satiric rod, to make him writhe and shriek aloud, you prefer to sting him under a semi-caress, by which he shall in his anguish be rendered dubious whether indeed anything has hurt him, you are an engine of Irony.

If you laugh all round him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and you

to your neighbour, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is a spirit of Humour that is moving you.

The Comic, which is the perceptive, is the governing spirit, awakening and giving aim to these powers of laughter, but it is not to be confounded with them: it enfolds a thinner form of them, differing from satire, in not sharply driving into the quivering sensibilities, and from humour in not comforting them and tucking them up, or indicating a broader than the range of this bustling world to them.

In the following Meredith states his main contention as to the uses of the comic spirit:

Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

With these passages before us it is interesting to turn to the *Spectator's* comment on this lecture, in its issue of February 10, 1877. The writer declares that 'the aroma of the lecture almost entirely exhales,' and he seems unable to recapture it. The article is admirably written and closely reasoned. Though based evidently on an incomplete report of the lecture, the writer loses nothing essential of Meredith's meaning, which may be a point in favour of a condensed report, for the elaborated lecture, as it now stands, is none too easy to follow, and the first reading leaves one somewhat fogged. Thus the *Spectator*:

As we understand Mr. Meredith, he intended to insist that the capacity for 'thoughtful laughter,' as distinguished from broad laughter, and still more from vacuous laughter, is one of the most unerring as well as subtle tests of civilisation, and if our reading is true, we can most cordially agree with him. To be capable of thoughtful laughter, of enjoying, say, a comedy in which the follies of the day are ridiculed without bitterness and without gross

exaggeration, and laughter is sought in provoking the sudden sense of surprise that a situation so familiar should be so ridiculous, a man must have most of the qualities which, when developed in a large aggregation of men, produce civilisation. He must be able to appreciate a kind of humour, in which the element of latent cruelty that goes to make broad humour, the humour of Western farce, is absent, as well as the grossness which performs the same function in the East; must be of perception quick enough to catch instantly the meaning of a situation; must have the habit of reflection, and must be, above all things, habitually tolerant, so tolerant that the laugh which strikes himself gives him a hint instead of creating irritation. A whole nation composed of such men would undoubtedly be in most respects in the mental condition to which civilisation is acceptable, and which, therefore, sooner or later produces it. We could not imagine an uncivilised nation cordially appreciating, say, merely to take an illustration of the hour, Mr. Robertson's 'Caste'; nor could we believe that a class capable of revelling in Miss Austen's novels, the whole merit of which is the sustained production of thoughtful laughter, was uncivilised. They were not bores, whatever their vices, who smiled over Molière. . . . A nation may be full of capacity for enjoying thoughtful laughter, and yet may from circumstances neither produce nor enjoy comedies of the highest kind. Mr. Meredith himself has mentioned the possibility of the capacity being restrained by mistaken religious feeling, but a people may be so situated that this special source of this special enjoyment is not encouraged sufficiently by the classes that support the theatre, and playwrights may be compelled to attract audiences by evoking a broader or more vacuous laughter. That must be the case more or less in every nation which is not, like the Athenian people, an aristocracy resting upon slave-labour, and in which there are violently differing grades of cultivation; and that is, we suspect, for other reasons, the case in England now. We are not about to discuss the causes of the situation, but as a fact, high comedy, comedy up to Mr. Meredith's ideal, does not 'draw.' Some exercise of the intellect is necessary to thoughtful laughter, and the classes who throng the theatres visit them in the main in the hope of being amused without intellectual exertion--wish for stimulus of a rougher kind, be it good or bad, strong situation or break-down dancing, and find their provocation to thoughtful laughter elsewhere than on the stage. It may be questioned if the theatres could be maintained by comedies of the kind which Mr. Meredith admires, and quite unquestionable that they are not produced in any numbers; that the Victorian Age, whatever its other merits—and they are great—will never be quoted as the age of an English Menander. It might be harsh to say that no play of our day will live except as a poem, but it may be taken as certain that no comedy will.



In spite of the fact that the theatre has outlived the Puritanical ban and that the nation is willing to be entertained by it, no one expects to see produced on the stage of our day, as described by Meredith, the ideal comedy, which will hold its place on the stage for centuries to come. But that is no proof, says the *Spectator*, that English civilisation has failed. The critique of the lecture concludes in these words :

The nation which in one generation has produced, recognised, and enjoyed Sydney Smith, Thackeray and George Eliot has no reason to defend its capacity either for producing or for enjoying thoughtful laughter. The love of the gently humorous and even of the subtly humorous has become a distinct characteristic, reaching farther down in society than many who habitually depreciate Englishmen are perhaps aware. Mr. Meredith must widen his test-question, to make it applicable to English society ; but when it is widened it is, we admit, one of the most searching of all. The laughter that springs of thought is the prerogative, as it is perhaps the highest intellectual enjoyment, of the civilised alone.

When 'The Idea of Comedy' was published in 1897, after being for twenty years accessible only in the files of the *New Quarterly Magazine*, among the critics who were attracted by it were Mr. G. B. Shaw and Mr. William Archer, to both of whom, as profound students of the stage, there was here much for reflection. Mr. Bernard Shaw, in his article in the *Saturday Review*, March 27, 1897, described Meredith as 'perhaps the highest living English authority on its subject.' He considered that Meredith knew more about plays than playgoers, and demurred to the statement that 'the English public have the basis of the comic in them : an esteem for common sense,' even when qualified with 'taking them generally.' To this Mr. Shaw rejoined :

If it were to be my last word on earth I must tell Mr. Meredith to his face that whether you take them generally or particularly—whether in the lump, or sectionally as playgoers, churchgoers, voters, and what not—they are everywhere united and made strong by the bond of their common nonsense, their invincible determination to tell and be told lies about everything, and their power of dealing acquisitively and successfully with facts whilst keeping them, like disaffected slaves, rigidly in their proper place : that is, outside the moral consciousness. The Englishman is the most successful man in the world simply because he values success—meaning money and social precedence—more than anything else, especially more than fine art, his attitude towards which, culture-affectation apart is one of half-diffident, half-contemptuous curiosity, and of course

more than clear-headedness, spiritual insight, truth, justice and so forth. It is precisely this unscrupulousness and singleness of purpose that constitutes the Englishman's pre-eminent 'common sense'; and this sort of common sense, I submit to Mr. Meredith, is not only not 'the basis of the comic,' but actually makes comedy impossible, because it would not seem like common sense at all if it were not self-satisfiedly unconscious of its moral and intellectual bluntness, whereas the function of comedy is to dispel such unconsciousness by turning the search-light of the keenest moral and intellectual analysis right on to it. . . . Thus he (the Englishman) is a moralist, an ascetic, a Christian, a truth-teller, and a plain dealer by profession and by conviction; and it is wholly against this conviction that, judged by his own canons, he finds himself in practice a great rogue, a liar, an unconscionable pirate, a grinder of the face of the poor and a libertine. Mr. Meredith points out daintily that the cure for this self-treasonable confusion and darkness is Comedy, whose spirit overhead will 'look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.' Yes, Mr. Meredith; but suppose the patients have 'common sense' enough not to want to be cured! Suppose they realise the immense commercial advantage of keeping their ideal life and their practical business life in two separate conscience-tight compartments, which nothing but 'the Comic Spirit' can knock into one! Suppose, therefore, they dread the Comic Spirit more than anything else in the world, shrinking from its 'illumination' and considering its 'silvery laughter' in execrable taste! Surely in doing so they are only carrying out the common-sense view, in which an encouragement and enjoyment of comedy must appear as silly and suicidal and 'un-English' as the conduct of the man who sets fire to his own house for the sake of seeing the flying sparks, the red glow in the sky, the fantastic shadows on the walls, the excitement of the crowd, the gleaming charge of the engines, and the dismay of the neighbours.

All this is very characteristic of Mr. Bernard Shaw, and there is his usual seriousness threading his lively wit. If Meredith has never spared the Englishman, what shall we say of Mr. Shaw? Meredith's severest trouncings of John Bull have been but gentle corrections compared with the whirling onslaughts of 'G. B. S.' Mr. Shaw even soundly asserts that the English playgoing public 'positively dislikes comedy'; but we must remember this was before his own comedies found fit audience in London as well as in New York and Berlin. Yet he makes a point when he says:

No: if this were an age for comedies Mr. Meredith would have been asked for one before this. How would a comedy from him be relished, I wonder, by the people who wanted to have the

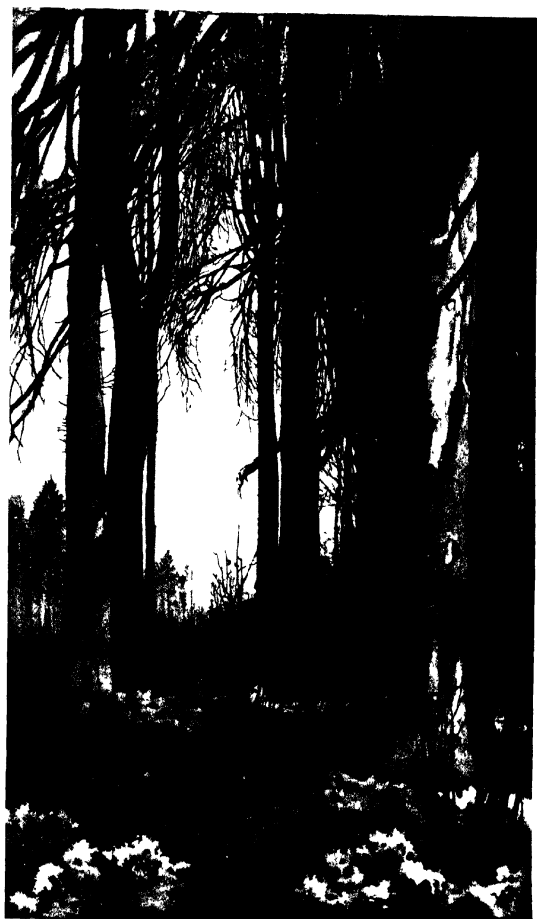
revisers of the Authorised Version of the Bible prosecuted for blasphemy because they corrected as many of its mistranslations as they dared, and who reviled Froude for not suppressing Carlyle's diary and writing a fictitious biography of him, instead of letting out the truth? Comedy, indeed! I drop the subject with a hollow laugh.

Mr. William Archer, in the *Westminster Gazette*, March 16, 1897, described the 'Essay on Comedy' as 'one of the subtlest, wittiest and most luminous pieces of criticism in the English language,' and declared that had he known it from its first magazine appearance it 'would have been a thing of light and leading' to him. He gives an excellent summary of its leading points rather than a running criticism of the same, and the most interesting paragraph of his article is that reprinted below :

One could wish that Mr. Meredith had said more of the relation between the comedy of types and the comedy of individual character. He has himself drawn the great type-figure of modern fiction—I mean, of course, 'the Egoist'—fusing, in that masterpiece, the two methods of art, and making of a colossal type a complete individual. Has it ever occurred to Mr. Meredith that the decline, not to say the impossibility, of pure comedy on the modern stage is due to the fact that the broad types are exhausted, and that individuals, if they live at all, touch our sympathies so nearly as to interfere with the free play of the Comic Spirit? It may be too much to say that the types are exhausted; but in any case the centring of all attention upon one vice or foible strikes us, in modern drama, as an expedient of farce. I am inclined, however, to foresee a revival of pure comedy (as distinct from farce on the one hand and the drama on the other) so soon as we shall have got over that itch for action and intrigue with which Scribe inoculated us. We are gradually expelling it from our blood; but it takes time. Fancy 'Le Misanthrope' or 'Les Femmes Savantes' produced for the first time before an audience of to-day! How the critics would cluster together in the *entr'actes* and buttonhole each other to explain that 'there's no action,' that 'nothing happens,' that 'we don't get any forr'ader,' that 'it's all talkee-talkee,' and so on through the whole litany! Which of us, I wonder, would pluck up heart to cry, like the legendary man in the pit, '*Courage, Molière! Voilà la bonne comédie!*'

Taking Meredith's own ideals of comedy and applying them to him as a novelist, 'F. Y. E.,' writing in the *Speaker*, October 31, 1903, on 'The Laughter of the Mind,' is led to this conclusion :

If we English have no such school of comedy, we have a literature



[An arrangement with the Toll Moll  
Maple tree.]

[Faintly visible in William  
Hille.]

THE WOODS OF WESTERMAIN NEAR WOOLTON, SURREY.

[To face p. 296]



comic

## THE COMIC SPIRIT

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steeped in the comic idea. We have Fielding, Goldsmith, Jane Austen—and another novelist's name must be added to these, their superior in the hierarchy of the imagination, their equal, at least, in the large sanity of his vision. The comic spirit is the spirit which has most constantly governed the attitude of Mr. Meredith towards his creatures. His appeal has been neither to the puritan nor to the hypergelasts, 'the excessive laughers, ever laughing, who are as clappers of a bell that may be rung by a breeze, a grimace, who are so loosely put together that a wink will shake them'; least of all to the sentimentalists who approve of satire because 'it smells of carrion, which they are not,' but dread comedy which 'cannot be used by any exalted variety as a scourge and a broom.' That in his vast and impressive work he transcends the comic goes without saying; but one great novel of his is entirely a comedy, and in that little masterpiece, 'The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper,' if the lady's treatment of the General is of the nature of irony, the author's treatment of both is purely comic. No Englishman writing fiction has aimed so directly at the head of his readers; none, seeing how thin is the drapery veiling our human passions, teaches us so clearly to respect it in the hope of something better; none, while showing men and women by unhappy chances justly or excusably rebellious against our state of society, has implicitly professed a more rooted belief that our state of society is founded in common sense, or so often provided the best correction of the bitterness that comes of dwelling upon contrasts, by arousing the Laughter of the Mind.

Mr. W. L. Courtney very happily chose for the title of his *Daily Telegraph* article on the eightieth birthday 'George Meredith and the Spirit of Comedy,' though only a few passages in the article justify its title. One of these passages, however, helps forward our present consideration of the subject. Mr. Courtney writes:

The finest flower of the Comic Spirit is to be found in Meredith's great novel 'The Egoist.' The earlier romances were more boyish, more boisterous. 'Evan Harrington,' for instance, is a kind of romantic farce, especially in the character of the Great Melchisedek, in which the author is supposed to have availed himself of some of his father's eccentricities, much as Dickens permitted his father to stand for part of the portrait of Mr. Micawber. 'Harry Richmond' was almost as youthfully hilarious. But when we get to the later work—for 'The Egoist' only appeared in 1879—we find a subtlety of analysis, an accuracy of perception, a mordant criticism, which the earlier work did not admit of. In many ways the portrait of Sir Willoughby Patterne in his relations with Clara Middleton is one of the most merciless pieces of dissection which was ever attempted. It is not altogether unkindly in tone, but it

is perfectly deadly in effect. We see before us exposed in a capital instance that which Meredith was inclined to think the great fault of the time, the narrow self-absorption, the splendid selfishness, the genial belief that the world existed in and for the sole personality of the self-conscious hero. Here the comic spirit is at work with a vengeance. Take, for instance—and it is a most suggestive contrast—the love-making in 'Richard Feverel' and the love-making in 'The Egoist.' Our octogenarian novelist is a romantic in the true sense of the term, in that he has the most sovereign faith in love. But he knows the difference between the youthful, ingenuous ardour of two human beings upon whom the divine madness has descended for the first time, and the paler, more ineffectual, more calculated philandering of the middle-aged.

Mr. Courtney then goes on to quote the well-known love-scene from 'Feverel,' and sets side by side with it Sir Willoughby's insisting upon Clara to swear she will love him 'beyond death,' leaving us, perhaps, to infer that the one is informed by the spirit of romance and the other by that of comedy, though further than observing that 'the egoism of Sir Willoughby stands bare' he offers no comment. But surely the whole scheme of 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' is as deeply rooted in comedy as that of 'The Egoist,' and even the love passages are in perfect tune with the comic spirit, though apart from the whole they might pass for romantic. We do not look for romance or the romantic under such a title as 'A Diversion played on a penny whistle,' nor do we get it, if we regard this scene as of a piece with the whole tragic-comedy, which we are surely justified in doing.

On the whole the criticism of Meredith and the Comic Spirit is the least satisfactory reach of the veritable Mississippi of Meredith criticism. It is apt to run to shallows, as we shall see presently. Instead of viewing him squarely as, first and last, a writer depicting life by means of types born of the comic spirit or, where otherwise conceived, still made to play their parts in comedy, his critics have been apt to content themselves by naming some subsidiary endowment of the comic as one of his attributes: now it is wit, now humour, and again it is satire or irony. Each of these qualities is distinct from the other, and seldom are any two of them found together, yet we find them all loosely attributed to the same man and touched upon without the slightest understanding by many otherwise excellent critics. If Meredith's own definitions already quoted in this chapter be kept in mind, we shall run no risk of confusing wit with humour, or irony with satire; and testing some

of the criticism by the aforesaid definitions, which are, beyond all cavil, just, we shall be able to correct much that has been written about him and is so near the truth that only the loose application of words keeps it from touching the mark. Broadly, Meredith is neither a wit nor a humorist, an ironist nor a satirist; but he is a great comic writer and as such 'he enfolds a thinner form' of all these others, making use of them all, but humour least of all, setting them in perspective, governing and directing them under the Comic. Mr. W. C. Brownell, I fancy, sees this clearly enough, though he sees it entirely to Meredith's disadvantage, since in his 'Victorian Prose Masters' it leads him to this conclusion:

His devotion to the tricksy spirit of Comedy led him early to emulate her elusiveness; the interest in the game grew upon him, and his latest books are marked by the very mania of indirection and inuendo. It is not obscurity of style that makes it difficult to follow the will-o'-the-wisp of his genius disporting itself over, it must be confessed, the marshiest of territory often, but the actual *chevaux-de-frise* his ingenuity interposes between his reader and his meaning. The obscurity lies in his whole presentation of the subject. He doles it out grudgingly, and endeavours to whip your interest by tantalising your perceptions. The elaborate exordium of 'Diana of the Crossways' should be read after reading the book. The prelude of 'The Egoist' can be understood at all only as a postlude. The beginning of 'Beauchamp's Career' is essentially a peroration, and in reading it how long is it before you discover that it is about the Crimean War you are reading? If an incident is imminent he defers it; if it is far in the future he puzzles you with adumbrative hints of it; if it is likely he masks its likelihood by presenting it fancifully; if it is improbable he exhausts ingenuity in rendering it probable. It is impossible not to conceive the notion that he is enjoying himself at your expense, at least that he is the host having a good time at his own party. It is not an occasional but a frequent experience to find the key to, say, three pages of riddle on the fourth page. And this would not be so disconcerting as it is, were it not for the fact that the riddle of the first three is carefully dissembled under that deceitful aspect of something palpably preliminary; so that until you come to the key you are not conscious of the existence of the riddle and only wonder why you don't comprehend. The interest of the dilettante is universal and ~~no doubt includes the pleasure of mystification~~. The effect produced is, however, ~~not suspense~~, which has been a reliance of less original novelists, but disquiet. His motive is to keep you guessing. He only explains when you have given it up. In the end even the reader who enjoys guessing must lose interest. For other readers the dullness of long stretches of his books must be



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appalling. A great part of the art of fiction consists in making the filling of the grand construction interesting and significant. But this demands temperament, and Mr. Meredith has to depend upon artifice. And his artifice is mainly mystification. It is the coquetry of comedy, not its substance.

This is an extreme criticism, for while it embodies certain strictures which are just and called for, it overstates Mr. Brownell's case—a good one in the main—and needs only one comic figure—one of so many—to be advanced against it to crumble it down; Mr. Brownell says 'it is the coquetry of comedy,' and we have but to take Sir Willoughby and retort, 'Behold the substance!' Henley, in his appreciation of 'The Egoist' quoted in a preceding chapter, has done full justice to Sir Willoughby; but at this point I should like to introduce a passage from M. Le Gallienne's well-known work on the characteristics of Meredith, which provides a good counterblast to Mr. Brownell:

Mr. Meredith names 'The Egoist' 'a comedy in narrative,' but in doing so he uses the word comedy with a significance rarely respected . . . mere satire, humour, or any species of fun-making are all very distinct from, however related to, that significance. These but result from the working of the comic spirit which in itself is only a detective force; they are, of course, included in this present comedy, but they are far from all. When one comes to consider Sir Willoughby one realises how far. It is Mr. Meredith's great study in that Comic Muse which he invokes in his first chapter, and yet he hardly keeps the table on a roar. At least, laughter is not the only emotion he excites; tears and terror rainbowed by laughter might figure our complicated impression. A tragic figure, discovered for us through the eye of comedy. It is certainly comic, in the customary sense, to see that great-mannered sublimity, that ultra-refined sentimentalism reduced to paradox by the exposure of its springs; but the laugh is only at the inconsistency, it can hardly face the fact. And to see Sir Willoughby on his knees vainly imploring that Lætitia, who has all through served but as an 'old-lace' foil for Clara, and with utter difficulty at last winning her, not for her sake either, but for fear of the world, the east wind of the world, and no longer the worshipful Juggernaut Lætitia of old, but Lætitia enlightened and unloving—all this is comic, of course; to see tables turned is always comic, but we must not forget that life is before them, and, as Hazlitt says, 'When the curtain next goes up it will be tragedy'—if the situation on which it falls can be called anything else. Sir Willoughby indeed inspires that greatest laughter which has its springs in the warmth and the richness of tears. If he is Mr. Meredith's greatest comic study,

he is, at the same time, his most pathetic figure. Of course, his pathos is not of the drawing-room ballad order, any more, indeed, than his comedy would 'select' for a 'library of humour'—those fields are fuller, Mr. Meredith rarely strives there, possibly for the same reason that Landor strove not. But those for whom he has any appeal must feel with his creator that 'he who would desire to clothe himself at everybody's expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the living person. Only he is not allowed to run at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation.' The pathos, as everything else in the book, is *essential*. That is, of course, why 'The Egoist' is so pre-eminently Mr. Meredith's typical book, and Sir Willoughby his typical characterisation; and there could hardly be a more victorious justification of a method.

That is as good as anything that has been written about Meredith and the Comic Spirit, and one cannot help feeling that even so fine a critic and devoted a Meredithian as the late James Thomson ('B. V.') does not quite hit the mark when he writes ('Cope's Smoke-room Booklets,' 1889):

George Meredith is distinctly rather a man's than a woman's writer. He has the broad, jolly humour, full-blooded with beef and beer, of great Fielding, as well as his swift, keen insight; he has the quaint, fantastic, ironical humour of the poet and scholar and thinker—freakish touches of Sterne and Jean Paul and Carlyle and his own father-in-law (Peacock, of 'Nightmare Abbey,' 'Gryll Grange,' 'Headlong Hall,' and other enjoyable sojourning places, who had Shelley for a friend). In brief, he is humoristic and ironical; and women in general care for no humour save of the nursery, distrust and dislike all irony except in talking with and about one another. But men will savour in that dialogue of Tinker and Ploughman the fine open-air wayside relish in which our robust old plays and novels are so rich, in which most of our modern are so poor. George Borrow, George Eliot, George Meredith, can reproduce for us this pithy, vulgar talk, succulent with honest nature and bookless mother wit; but how many else can furnish it unadulterated? I have named our most popular—and justly popular—great novelist along with him who is one of the least popular; and to my mind he is throned not less eminent than she; and if certain jewels in her crown are lacking in his, he has others not less precious that are wanting in hers.

Thomson in the foregoing has failed of the larger view, and the best that Henry Holbeach (William Brighty Rands) could say was that Meredith was 'above all things capable of being a humorist

of the Shandean school ' The fact is that we should have had less difference of opinion as to the Comic Spirit and Meredith if he had been more of a humorist and less a wit But then he had not been George Meredith A humorist could never have set out to war on sentimentalists, as he must be something of a sentimentalist himself Note his own analysis of the humorist, and we shall see how seldom it applies to himself We do not find him often 'laugh all round him (the ridiculous person), tumble him, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him,' and the rest The Comic is his inspirer, and, true to his muse, he is rarely to be found 'comforting and tucking up' the objects of his attention, as the humorist, out of his kindly, sympathetic heart is for ever doing Mr J M Barrie, surely one of our greatest humorists, writes of Meredith with real insight when he says, in the *Contemporary*, October, 1888.

It is Mr Meredith's wit that wearies many of his readers He is, I think, the greatest wit this country has produced Sheridan is not visible beside him, and Pope has only the advantage of polish Mr Meredith is far more than a wit, but wit is his most obvious faculty, and he seldom keeps it in subordination Wit does not proceed from the heart, and so in many of Mr Meredith's books there is little heart They compare badly in this respect with Thackeray's novels, indeed, his characters are often puppets, as Thackeray's were not, and the famous ending to 'Vanity Fair' would be in its proper place at the end of 'The Lgoist' This want of heart is a part of the price Mr Meredith pays for his wit, but he also suffers in another way, that damages his books as comedies not less than as novels He puts his wit into the mouths of nearly every one of his characters They are all there to sparkle, and in the act to destroy their individuality They are introduced in lines so wise and pointed that at once they stand out as sharply defined human beings, then they talk as the persons we had conceived could never talk, and so we lose grip of them It is this that makes so many readers unable to follow the story, they never know when they have the characters

Of course, even in this Mr Barrie is dealing only with one aspect of the subject, and that is concerned more with the medium than with the matter No criticism of Meredith that treats largely or in detail of his literary style is going deep enough We are still among the shallows when we have said all that can be said about his witty presentment of his themes We have to take his novels as a whole, ignoring all verbal eccentricities, all that may run counter to established notions of literary art, and ask ourselves what is the driving

force that gave them being. So regarded, the Comic Spirit is seen over and in them all, dictating 'The Shaving of Shagpat' and presiding forty years later over the writing of 'The Amazing Marriage.' The 'sword of common sense' gleams through each one of the splendid series.

Sword of Common Sense!—  
Our surest gift: the sacred chain  
Of man to man: firm earth for trust  
In structures vowed to permanence:—  
Thou guardian issue of the harvest brain.

### XIII

#### HIS PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Deepest and keenest of our time who pace  
The variant by-paths of the uncertain heart,  
In undiscerned mysterious ways apart,  
Thou huntest on the Assyrian monster's trace :  
That sweeping-pinioned Thing-with-human-face—  
Poor Man—with wings hoof-weighted lest they start  
To try the breeze above this human mart.  
In heights pre-occupied of a god-like race.

Among the stammering sophists of the age  
Thy words are absolute, thy vision true ;  
No hand but thine is found to fit the gage  
The Titan, Shakespeare, to a whole world threw.  
Till thou hast boldly to his challenge sprung,  
No rival had he in our English tongue.

W. MORTON FULLERTON, in *The Yellow Book*.

‘HE, too, like all the larger spirits of this age of inward trouble and perplexity, whether with or against his will, must needs be a preacher,’ says Dr. Dowden in his study of Meredith’s poetry. Some would have it that he is a preacher before all else, that his philosophy will outlast his art. But as to what that philosophy is, he has left us in no doubt, it is enunciated with sufficient clearness and consistency in his prose and poetry. In the poems it is, of course, expressed with a concentration, a compression of words, which makes many a ringing phrase memorable, unforgettable, and so leads one to the erroneous conclusion that it is more ingrained in his poetry than in his prose. The observant student knows it is not so. Yet examine the writings of the critics who have sought to express Meredith’s philosophy, and you will find the rarest brief mentions of the novels. I have read every article of the kind, every incidental reference, and I declare one might conclude from them that Meredith’s novels had scant concern with philosophy. The fact is that, had he never written a line of verse, every feature and detail of his philosophy had been obvious in his prose fiction, but, having given us the essence of his philosophy in his poetry, his expositors naturally and wisely choose that for their exegeses. It is







not a case of the one medium amplifying or correcting the ethical teaching of the other, but of both setting forth the same reading of life and earth.

A probable consequence of this would lead us to thought of Meredith's ultimate place, a subject reserved for consideration in a later chapter. But here one is tempted to observe that if it is his teaching that singles him out from the writers of his time, and if that teaching is given with more intensity and directness in his poetry, the chances are that his fame as a poet will outgrow and finally obscure his reputation as a novelist. Furthermore, if it is philosophy men will seek for in his poetry, in turn the æsthetic consideration of that may give place to the ethical, and the teaching of the poetry, hardening into a quickly-defined creed, even the poetry, which is not always most pleasing where it is most philosophic, may cease to attract, and the poet become a force in the abstraction of thought rather than a companion singer of the thoughtful reader.

Half-a-dozen lines of his verse might be chosen as a sort of tabloid of his teaching. It is capable of the utmost compression and the utmost expansion. Join 'The Egoist' to 'Richard Feverel,' 'Vittoria,' 'One of Our Conquerors,' and 'Lord Ormont'—a mighty mass of exposition—and it is by no means complete. Take 'Modern Love' and the whole is there; every phase and facet of it there! And in the sixty lines of 'Earth and a Wedded Woman' the whole immutable ethic of nature, as he conceives it, is epitomised. But of this later; we have to note many features of his teaching before we arrive at his 'reading of earth.' His point of view, his mental approach, must first engage us, and this was put in a striking way by Mr. J. A. Newton-Robinson in 'A Study of Mr. George Meredith' in *Murray's Magazine*, December, 1891, where he wrote:

Life to Mr. Meredith is a game, though it is true he watches the moves of the pieces with keen and serious interest. His characters are machines which he expounds to us. He is a psychological showman.

'Ladies and gentlemen, walk this way! Here is an interesting model never before placed under the microscope. Observe the dull blood running through the heart, how slow and pulseless! Note that subtle manifestation of egoism, that burst of emotion! This exhibit, on the contrary, is morally well put together, and shows the action of a noble unselfishness. This interesting creature has gleams of poetry and grace'—and so on, and so on, till the brain grows wearied and confused with hearkening to the whirr of the

wheels of our mental clockwork. This dissection of the human soul is, however, done with marvellous dramatic skill, and an exquisitely handled knife. The exposition is not *doctrinaire* or dogmatic, but rather empirical and living, proceeding by examples rather than by theory, and bears the impress of a mind of high quality and rarest insight, being in fact, after all deductions, the work of true genius.

There is no manner of doubt that intellect counts for more with Meredith than with any other novelist or poet we can name. He looks at everything with the mind, never with the feelings, and even when he touches us emotionally,—as he does magnificently in such an episode as the swimming Aminta, calling ‘Matey’ to Weyburn in the sea, and freeing herself for ever from Lord Ormont by her heart-cry to her first lover,—look close and we shall find that the whole effect is intellectually considered from the author’s side. Miss Flora L. Shaw (Lady Lugard), in her valuable study of Meredith, contributed to the *New Princeton Review* of March, 1887, gives the gist of a talk with him in which he had been advancing the banner of intellect. She writes :

Mr. Meredith held intellect to be the chief endowment of man, and that in him which it is most worth while to develop. ‘By intellectual courage,’ he said, ‘we make progress. Intellect is the guide of the spiritual man. Feeling and conduct are to be thought of as subordinate to it. Intellect should be our aim. It can be developed by training. The morbid and sentimental tendencies in the ordinary healthy individual can be corrected by it. Starting wrongly, a man can be brought right by it. The failure of many eminent men in old age is to be attributed to the habit of looking at life sentimentally rather than intellectually. Truth seeks truth! And we find truth by the understanding. Let the understanding be only fervid enough, and conduct will follow naturally. When we consider what the earth is and what we are, whither we tend, and why, we perceive that reason is, and must be, the supreme guide of man. Perceive things intellectually. Keep the mind open and supple. Then, as new circumstances arise, man is fit to deal with them, and to discern right and wrong.’

‘But Socrates’—and I ventured here to quote Professor Clifford’s ‘Virtue is habit.’

‘Unquestionably that applies to the moral truths already conquered. Virtue is the habit of conforming our actions to truth, once perceived. But in the life of every man and nation unforeseen circumstances arise, circumstances which are outside the ordinary, already decided laws. It is by the intellect, by the exercise of reason, that we can alone rightly deal with these. The man whose

intellect is awake will conquer new domain in the moral world. It is our only means of spiritual progress. Habits of conduct, though excellent, are insufficient. They guide us in the beaten track; when new matter presents itself they are evidently unable to deal with it.'

I wish I could recall the vivacity, the keen vigour, the wealth of wit and illustration with which he sustained his theme. As we walked along a stretch of turf on the summit of Box Hill, with the southern landscape lying pearly beneath us, and a south-east wind boisterously singing through the reddening woods upon the hill, he seemed to raise our spirits to corresponding heights, rough, pure and keen, where footing was not easy, but invigorating, and every breath was sharp and good to draw. We spoke of death. He said, 'It should be disregarded. Live in the spirit. Project your mind toward the minds of those whose presence you desire, and you will then live with them in absence and in death. Training ourselves to live in the universal, we rise above the individual.'

This leaves us in no degree of doubt as to the controlling force of Meredith's life: the force that finds expression in all his works. It also explains many things affecting the public appeal of his fiction — 'Narrative is nothing,' he said to Miss Shaw; 'it is the mere vehicle of philosophy' — but that is not our immediate concern. The extraordinary feature of his worship of intellect, his belief that intellect can furnish all the moral and spiritual needs of man, is that he retains both 'sweetness and light.' Yet he has often been accused by the thoughtless of cynicism, touching which Miss Shaw observes:

It has been said, on the one hand, that he is a cynic; on the other, that he writes over the heads of the public, and is unreadable. With regard to the first accusation, it is the lot of every one who wars against sentimentalism, especially where the strokes are delivered with the Homeric vigour of Mr. Meredith's; but it is altogether unfounded. He says of himself: 'I never despair of humanity. I am an ardent lover of nature. It is therefore impossible that I should be a cynic.' The business of the novelist who aims at truth is to illustrate the variability of the human species. He must take men and women as they are, not by any means all commonplace, but with human liability to error, which heroism does not necessarily eradicate. The best men are still imperfect. To recognise this is not cynicism, while we perceive that the imperfect may also be the best.

Assuredly there is no abstraction Meredith has warred against more valiantly than 'sentiment' or 'sentimentality.' But it is a moot question whether author and reader are ever quite clear as

between them on the exact shade of meaning that is to be given to the word 'sentiment.' For this the author is perhaps as much to blame as his reader, and the very competent critic who took his text from Miss Flora Shaw's article to deliver in the *Atlantic Monthly* of June, 1887, 'A Word with Mr. George Meredith,' shows that the philosopher is tempted to push his campaign too far, while also venturing to discount somewhat Meredith's estimate of intellect as the spiritual treasure-house of man. The *Atlantic* critic puts his case in this way :

What the novelist means is plain enough, and undeniably it is true doctrine; but I would except against his using the word 'sentiment,' where what he really describes is sentimentality. Sentiment is not passion, it does not imply any deep or strong feeling, but it is something so far as it goes; its tendency may be to run into sentimentality, still it ought to be distinguished from the latter. . . .

Mr. Meredith's remedy for the cure of 'sentiment' is development of the reasoning powers, and the raising of the intellect into lordship over sensation and fancy. Here, it strikes me, he preaches a half truth only. It is indeed hard to say too much for the value of rationality in all the concerns and relations of life. Irrationality is the huge, lumbering giant against whose strength we have to contend daily, and who is overthrown now only to rise in renewed force in some other shape to-morrow. It is true that what looks like heartlessness in people is sometimes simple stupidity; yet this is not the sole root of difficulty, and Mr. Meredith, if he could invent some clever process for the sharpening of men's wits and proceed to apply it universally, might be surprised to learn that, though he had possibly destroyed false sentiment, true feeling was not invariably found to take its place. The sad fact is that many people have very little feeling at all, and it is not the most enlightened intellects that go together with the warmest and sincerest hearts. Different capacities of feeling exist in men and women, and these natural capacities are so unevenly developed! The problem is a far harder one than Mr. Meredith supposes. . . . What we want in place of false sentiment is genuine, deep, warm feeling. But where it is not, there to plant and make it grow,—tell us how to do this, O ye wise!

This would certainly be a teasing task for many Merediths! 'It is not the most enlightened intellects that go together with the warmest and sincerest hearts,' says the critic, laying his finger on the weak spot of the Meredithian intellectualism. We must all recognise that it is here Meredith's philosophy of pure reason fails. Dickens may have been a mere dealer in sentiment, occasionally in

sentimentality, but does he not gain humanwise because he is not afraid at times to be guided by his feelings, where Meredith would look for a lead to his brain only?

But it is easy to make too much of Meredith's intellectuality; the tendency is to over-emphasise it. Mr. G. M. Trevelyan coins an excellent phrase for it when he describes him as 'the inspired prophet of sanity.' Professor Oliver Elton has a fine chapter on Meredith in his 'Modern Studies.' In the course of his study he writes with real discernment on Meredith's philosophy, and I must find space here for this instructive passage:

Mr. Meredith has never struck home to them (the bigger reading public) as Dickens struck home with his splendid humanity, his uncertain art and modern education, and his true wealth of genial and farcical type. Some, too, of those devoted to Thackeray's vast and populous canvas, to his occasional classic sureness and constant elegance of speech (amidst much that is merely journalistic fiction), and to his half-dozen scenes of vehement human drama, may have shivered at the refreshing east wind and shrunk from the mountain sickness that the reader of Meredith must face. To read him is like climbing, and calls for training and eyesight; but there is always the view at the top, there are the sunrise and the upper air. Nor is such a tax always paid him willingly by the better-trained serious public of escaped and enlightened puritans, the dwindled public of George Eliot. Nor has he much in common with the novelists, English and other, of a later day.

For he, like Goethe, 'bids you hope,' while 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' and 'The Wings of the Dove' do not. The movement of later fiction is toward pessimism, and its best makers, Guy de Maupassant, Gorky, D'Annunzio, agree in their want of hopefulness if in nothing else. They have been catching up and expressing in fiction ideas that found a nobler expression, philosophical or lyrical, nearly a century ago, in Schopenhauer and Leopardi. The same discouragement lay at the base of Tolstoy's thought, before he found his peculiar salvation, and it still tinges his fiction when he forgets his creed and remembers he is an artist. The history of this pessimistic movement in fiction is still unwritten, and the movement itself is unexhausted.

But the groundwork of Mr. Meredith, with his forward look, his belief in love and courage, is different. It is stoical rather than pessimistic; and in that he resembles Zola, whose method—laborious, serried, humourless—is the opposite of his. Mr. Meredith grew up on the high hopes fed by the revolution of the mid-century, and the most heroic figure in his books is Mazzini, the 'Chief' in 'Vittoria.' He has a moral and spiritual afflatus of the nobler order, peculiarly and traditionally English, in that line of the great

English prophets which come down from Langland and Sir Thomas More to Carlyle. His creed does not depend, visibly, on formal doctrine for its force, but neither does it rest on any pre-occupying enmity towards doctrine. His inspiration plays in various moods—strenuous, ethereal, ironical—rarely serene, over his vision of 'certain nobler races, now dimly imagined'; and casts a new interpreting light, above all, on the rarer forms of love and patriotism and friendship. Yet there are none of the airs of the prophet, for the media preferred by Mr. Meredith in his prose are wit and aphorism, situation and portraiture, and to these the lyrical didactic elements are subordinate.

One might fancy that the foregoing are among the passages referred to by the late York Powell in a very breezy and characteristic letter to Professor Elton printed in his 'life' of Powell, whence I quote the following; but Dr. Elton informs me that they refer to an earlier essay of his:

Balzac if you like; a thinker, an historian, an artist, a mighty labourer; but Tolstoy does not deserve comparison with Meredith. Don't laugh, think it over, without remembering it is 'prejudiced' I that write this.

Well and finely done, too, the last paragraph. You might enlarge on the Earth-spirit. Try and smite out the man's creed in one or two sentences, for he is a prophet as well as an artist. He has something to tell us: 'we bid you to hope.' Tolstoy, good God! a miserable nonconformist set of silly preachments. Meredith is sound like Shakespeare. Do bring in Balzac. . . . Cut out Tolstoy. Away with these half-baked potatoes. Balzac and Meredith will represent their century. Do not mention such a person as George Eliot, let her lie. She did some good work and much bad. She meant well, and she and Mrs. Grundy quarrelled, and made it up over filthy Ghetto piety. . . . I am boiling because I can't sit opposite you to argue with. You have done a fine bit of work. I am glad you praised Henley. He is the only man who has really tried to judge G. M. W. Morris says, 'A clever man, not an artist.' *He* can't rise above the naïve melodic.

Professor Elton was evidently not inclined to 'away with the half-baked potatoes,' as we have seen there is a reference to Tolstoy in his later study, as well as in the earlier one which had been submitted to Powell for criticism. But this conjunction of the names of Tolstoy and Meredith—concerning which most Meredithians will echo Powell's lusty veto—does help to an understanding of the greater man by contrasting the feebler Russian with the magnificently energetic Briton. Meredith himself supplies us with a picture

of Tolstoy, for in a talk with Mr. G. H. Perris (*Westminster Gazette*, February 9, 1905) he delivered himself in good set terms as to the Tolstoian precept of 'non-resistance':

'I am perfectly persuaded,' he said with emphasis, 'that submission to evil is a distinct evil in itself. But I am not prepared to say that a bloody resistance is required, unless, as in this case, when a nation may be compared to a man with another holding a knife at his throat. In such a case, not to resist is grave error; and I imagine that, in the revolution of time, what the English call unmanliness proves to be a dangerous thing for men even to witness, let alone to practise. Tolstoy's is a too-easily saddened mind. Of course I recognise his power; it is a reminder to us that if a man devotes himself to one particular object he becomes a force whenever that object comes prominently before the mind of the world. But no! I don't go with him so far in his Christian precepts, though I can well understand that a brave man may feel himself under the dominion of Christ, and therefore that he would follow the lead of his Lord to the end. Tolstoy is a noble fellow, but he is *tant soit peu fanatique*. I listen to him with great reverence, sure of his sincerity, but not always agreeing with his conclusions.'

In the course of the same interview Meredith touched upon his own stoical interpretation of Nature in these words:

We are all hunted more or less. Yet Nature is very kind to all her offspring. If you are a fine runner and your blood is up, you don't, in point of fact, feel a half of what you do when lying in bed or sitting in a chair thinking about it. A man in battle array facing his enemy with his blood up is ready to give and take. If these humanitarians would only study Nature more!

We must all bear our burden in the world. True, it is a kind of world Nietzsche and other preachers of Nirvana—and our dear Tolstoy comes near them sometimes—don't approve, and even proclaim better ended. I imagine such people must have been begotten in melancholy mood—by a man in a fury with his natural appetites, and a woman reluctantly wishing for a child. Hence this singular issue, that they look upon extinction as a saving grace. It is those who are the foes of Nature. Probably many of them are of a delicate constitution, unable to rough it with the rough. So they look upon the shocks of life as though ferocious demons had been sent to work among them; the truth being that we have all come from the beasts, and the evil they talk about is nothing but the perpetual recurrence of beast-like tendencies. Those we may hope to exercise; but we cannot depart from the founts of our origin, our links with the world of Nature,



As to Death, any one who understands Nature at all thinks nothing of it. Her whole concern is perpetually to produce nourishment for all her offspring. We go that others may come—and better, if we rear them in the right way. In talking of these deep things, men too often make the error of imagining that the world was made for themselves.

In an interview with Mr. H. W. Nevinson (*Daily Chronicle*, July 5, 1904), eight months earlier than that quoted above, Meredith had also touched upon the attitude of mankind towards death, saying that 'fearlessness of death is a necessary quality,' and that it is 'essential for manliness.'

'Doctors and parsons are doing a lot of harm' (he went on) 'by increasing the fear of death and making the English less manly. No one should consider death or think of it as worse than going from one room into another. The greatest of political writers has said, "Despise your life, and you are master of the lives of others." Philosophy would say, "Conquer the fear of death, and you are put into possession of your life." I was a very timid and sensitive boy. I was frightened of everything; I could not endure to be left alone. But when I came to be eighteen, I looked round the world (as far as a youth of eighteen can look) and determined not to be afraid again. Since then I have had no fear of death. Every night when I go to bed I know I may not rise from it. That is nothing to me. I hope I shall die with a good laugh, like the old French woman. The curé came wailing to her about her salvation and things like that, and she told him her best improper story, and died. The God of Nature and human nature does not dislike humour, you may be sure, and would rather hear it in extremity than the formless official drone. Let us believe in a hearty God—one to love more than to fear.'

His tone then changed a little, and, rather as if in soliloquy, he passed into regions more remote.

'There is Pan,' he said. 'You know something about Pan, too. He has always been very close to me. He is everywhere—so is the devil, who was framed on the model of him by our mediæval instructors. Just now the devil is more thought of in England than the Christian God. He is more popular. The time will come for the mind of man to see the veritable God. Nature goes on her way, unfolding, improving, always pushing us higher; and I do not believe that this great process continues without some spiritual purpose, some spiritual force that drives it on. Change is full of hope. A friend of mine was lamenting over the sadness of autumn. "Are you sad when you change your coat?" I asked him.'



THE END OF THE LINE

ONE OF MR LAWRENCE HOUSMAN'S ILLUSTRATIONS FOR  
JUNE TO OCTOBER 1911

Her list was Worry I am sad and  
Of won't not to let in lined



All this, though it may be described as merely the obiter dicta of an aged philosopher, deserves to be recorded, since it is in tune with the philosophy expounded in the prose and poetry, that 'stoic ecstasy' expressed in his familiar lines :

Oh, green and bounteous earth,  
Into the breast that gives the rose  
Shall I with shuddering fall?

And now the need arises for devoting particular attention to Meredith's interpretation of Nature, whose almost ~~pagan worship~~ shared with Intellect the whole passion of his being. There is much here to engage us, and as a prelude to the study of this aspect of his philosophy it is interesting to quote a passage from a long-forgotten article by the late Moncure D. Conway, contributed by him to the *Glasgow Herald*, August 14, 1883, and descriptive of his voyage round the world. Conway read 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' on a 'soft July day in mid-Atlantic,' and he speaks of the book as a call to come back to old England, where are all the joys of earth, and where the wanderer may find all that he has gone in search of in his far journeyings. So Conway is led to moralise in this strain :

It may also be needful that one should circumnavigate the Earth to win what another finds by circumnavigating a dewdrop. He must have lived long and voyaged far who can explore this little book, and even understood the Joy of Earth it sings. Therefore it is too much to hope that the millions will pause to listen to this poet who, did they know it, might set their myriad footfalls to music. In these songs, fresh from the soul of this summer, George Meredith appears to me one of the few poets who greet with joy a dawn which more famous morning-stars of song meet with threnodies of fear and pain. ~~With the unbelief revealed alike in pessimism, philosophy and panic he has simply nothing to do.~~ Take all that belongs to you, gentlemen—so he meets the sceptic and the scientist—and I will even add all you may suspect belongs to you, myself included ! What then ? That skylark will sing all the vanished angels sang, heaven will smile through that child's eyes bright as through the olden stars, and the heart of the universe will not cease to beat so long as I love. There are things that live in undiminished strength when opinions of them have passed away ; nay, which are even enhanced by knowledge—like that rosy cloud on which Columbus and his mariners gazed, but which proved to be the New World. Most of our opinions will be fossil remains after a time, and it would appear that experience has gradually trained the heart of man to love and seek a satisfaction in the realm which poetry

and art can actually build out of that heart's emotions and aspirations. The task of George Meredith is different from that assigned the poet by the Wordsworthian or any other school. It is not interpretation of nature as a pantheistic phenomenon; it is not to deal with nature as symbolism of another and invisible, though equally material, nature. Rather it is to detach the roses of nature from their thorns, to anticipate the evolutionary work of ages and show the far final outcome of things as if present in the joy of their vision. There is no awe, no worship of hugeness and force, but of beauty, loveliness, sweetness, and in the rapture of this worship the vileness and agonies of the earth are abolished and forgotten. Let who will deal with the evil side of nature, the inhuman side, this poet will, imaginatively, create for us a world in which all evil shall be fabulous as dragons, and ~~teach us a secret of spiritual selection~~ by which we may surround ourselves with a harmonious order crystallised out of common quarries, like the diamond. Is not this better than to turn our May-Day evil ~~with ravings~~ against our age, especially as the age doesn't in the least care for our ravings? Is it not the better poetic art to show what peace, hope, joy may be gathered as wayside blooms, and show every petal of them tinted with glow of the ancient heavens?

A very full and minutely considered estimate of Meredith's philosophy of nature was that contributed by Miss F. Melian Stawell to the *International Journal of Ethics*, April, 1902, entitled 'The Conception of Nature in the Poems of Meredith.' The writer begins by disposing of the false notions which have been attached to the word 'Nature' in our time, restating the chief meaning of it still current. What she chiefly aims at is the exclusion of that interpretation of nature which would have every impulse 'natural' and so make ethical chaos come again. She sets herself also to the identification of certain dimly realised impulses springing from nature and inquires why 'natural' could have become synonymous for 'good.' While reminding us that even lovers of nature are not blind to the fact that all is not beautiful in nature, she sums up by saying that 'if nature is not moral in herself, she is yet on the side of morality.' Indeed, it would not be misrepresenting Miss Stawell's roughly thrown out definitions of nature to say that it is something closely resembling Matthew Arnold's description of God: 'the enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness.' How far, if at all, this squares with the Meredithian notion of nature, we shall see. Miss Stawell thus sets forth the latter, by no means confining her inquiries to the poems, though the title of her article would give that impression:

The external world, apart from the wills of men, Meredith holds to be the manifestation of one Power, 'Nature,' a power distinct from Man and yet akin to him, akin to the best he has in him to be. And the urge in each of us towards physical life and enjoyment springs from the same source, and shows in a similar way a real connection with the Best.

Nature in us is, primarily, the force that makes for individual life, and these impulses are therefore 'natural' in the prime sense of the word. But they make for something more, and therefore they are to be called 'good' also, not good, that is, just because they are natural, but because the natural holds in it the seed of good. But the seed is, so to speak, dormant, and can only be developed by our struggle, a struggle that is not ignorant of pain and failure.

Though Meredith 'does not attempt to define with philosophical accuracy the precise relationship between these impulses and what we may call their fulfilment,' he makes it clear that these impulses do prompt to something beyond themselves, something that our reason could recognise as absolutely good.' One of the 'gates of life' is the physical joy or 'bodily exaltation' which lifts one towards 'the footstool of the Highest.' 'Through Nature only can we ascend,' is one of the maxims from 'The Pilgrim's Scrip':

It is in such a spirit as this (says Miss Stawell) that Whitman can celebrate 'the life of my senses and flesh, transcending my senses and flesh,' and that Wordsworth can sing of

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

Half understood, often misunderstood, again and again this belief in Nature and health comes back upon man. The Bacchanal madness may have meant little else. Such a wild guess at truth is Meredith's theme in the daring impressive grotesque he calls 'Jump-to-Glory Jane.' To Jane, the peasant founder of a Shaker Sect, jumping has become the very way of life. She has been visited with sensations of bodily health and vigour that open spiritual vistas, sensations that 'are to her as the beings of angels in her frame,' and through all the whimsical absurdity Mr. Meredith never lets us forget that

It is a lily-light she bears  
For England up the ladder-stairs

It is not that the indulgence of the senses is a kind of pleasurable sauce to be supped now and then in a holiday mood: the senses are rather the raw material of the satisfying life: they are even more,

for they are no alien matter on which a form has to be imposed from without: of themselves they demand from their own peace a higher use: the body, as Meredith puts it, is the bride calling for the spirit who is to be the bridegroom; it is 'by her own live warmth' ~~alone that Nature can~~ 'be lifted out of slime.' Reason is the child of the great mother, the child who is to interpret her inarticulate cries. There is no ultimate discord in the elements of which we are made. Here on this earth we can come in sight of what Browning calls

The ultimate angel's law,  
There where life, law, joy, impulse, are one thing.

But to achieve this starry harmony man must toil; the ~~forward~~ reach, the upward struggle ~~alone can realise~~ the ideal of 'Three Singers to Young Blood,' when, from having been jarred and discordant, 'chimed they in one.' Nature alone and independent of Man is not moving towards a great ideal. Meredith has remembered what Browning said of

. . . . . how the devil spends  
A fire God gave for other ends.

when he himself sings in 'The Empty Purse':

How the God of old time will act Satan of New,  
If we keep him not straight at the higher God aimed.

And the business of life when life is 'thoroughly lived' is just this interpretation of Nature, this 'reading of Earth.' This is what it means to 'keep faith with Nature'—we are not 'wise of her prompting,' ~~we have not understood~~ the rose of her in our blood, if it gives no birth to the 'rose in brain,' if the human Good does not blossom out of the natural. Nor does Meredith leave that Good a mere abstraction, though it is not his task to give an inventory of its contents. ~~Sympathy and courage~~ are for him true flowers of that immortal garland whose roots are 'in good gross earth.' Our problems must all be solved in 'the soul of brotherhood.' 'Not until we are driven back upon an inviolated Nature, do we call to the intellect to think radically: and then we begin to think of our fellows.' Thus it is ~~idle to dream of mere self-indulgence~~. The man who has been deceiving himself under the pretext that he is 'made of flesh and blood' finds no answer to soothe him after he is started into a searching doubt of his 'clamorous appeals to Nature.' 'Are we, in fact, harmonious with the great Mother when we yield to the pressure of our nature for indulgence? Is she, when translated into us, solely the imperious appetite?'

Clearly no, for Meredith's plea is that, in order to correspond in the widest sense to our environment (if I may use Spencer's phrase-

ology here) we have, as Miss Stawell puts it, 'to refuse the demands of our narrow self in the name of the wider.' This ceaseless struggle with our own appetites, even against 'natural instincts,' means the winning of wisdom, but the struggle must go on, and man's conquest is the fact that he takes part in it, he is victorious in the mere wage of the battle and beaten only should he cease to fight. 'The fact that character can be and is developed by the clash with circumstances is to Meredith warrant for infinite hope.' Again I quote from Miss Stawell:

But just as the urge to life within us holds, wrapped up in it, much more than mere living, so the union with Nature means much more than this. To be in contact with natural things is to touch source of righteousness as well as of strength. All poets, haps, have felt something of this faith, but Meredith makes corner-stone of his thinking. Wordsworth and Whitman offer the nearest parallels to his work in this as in many other points. Whitman will create his poems in the open air and test them 'by trees, stars, rivers'; he knows that system 'may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents.' True religion is taught to Wordsworth's 'wanderer' as much by 'his habitual wanderings, out of doors' as by his 'goodness and kind works.' Meredith makes a Diana who has lost her way feel that 'one morning on the Salvatore heights, would wash her clear of the webs defacing and entangling her.' In one of his most striking poems ('Earth and a Wedded Woman') a 'lone-laid wife,' tempted to weakness and inconstancy, lies awake all night after a season of drought 'to hear the rain descend,' and the mere sound and smell of the rain, the breathings from Earth's 'heaved breast of sacred common mould' of themselves bring to her strengthening that she needs. So special and marked, indeed, is the virtue that goes out of Nature that these three poets are agreed in placing it, in a sense, above what can be got from Man. Why is this? Is it just because Nature is the expression of something other, though akin, of an aspect of the whole that could not be resolved into human consciousness? The poets do not answer, but they hold unmistakably that there is something to be got from Nature which cannot be supplied elsewhere. It is doing Wordsworth wrong to explain away his outburst (in 'The Tables Turned'):

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can.

Meredith's 'South-West Wind in the Woodlands' echoes the thought, almost the very words:



The voice of Nature is abroad  
 This night; it fills the air with balm;  
 Her mystery is o'er the land;  
 And he who hears her now, and yields  
 His being to her yearning tones,  
 And seats his soul upon her wings,  
 And broadens o'er this wind-swept wold  
 With her, will gather in the flight  
 More knowledge of her secret, more  
 Delight in her beneficence,  
 Than hours of musing, or the love  
 That lives with men could ever give!

In this same spirit Whitman speaks of the impression from the starlit sky as beyond anything from art, books, sermons, or from science old or new.

But what we have to know of man in his intercourse with nature is that something more than the heroic temper is required of him. 'Faith,' Meredith frankly tells him, is needed; as if he were an orthodox preacher pleading with them 'of little faith.' His own faith in a something in Nature for transcending all phenomena is made intensely real to every reader of his poetry. 'Nature he believes not only sends us after a good which is our good, but she whispers that we can reach it,' and so we are led to the belief that 'Nature is another partial expression of the same ultimate Power working for good that stirs in us, a Power which is greater than either of its manifestations, which in the end is ruler of all.'

But Meredith is reticent on the matter (says Miss Stawell), and it is hard to be sure of his precise view. Whatever it is, however, there can be no doubt of his hope. We shall gain, if we are valiant, what will content the valiant. Nothing can stand in the way of that, not death itself. The impulse, fortified by communion with Nature, to face everything that can befall us whether from within or from without, in the faith that it can be stamped with heroism, is a sign that the soul of man can conquer in the battle: in the words of his Diana, it is 'a little boat to sail us past despondency of life and the fear of extinction. . . . *There is nothing the body suffers that the soul may not profit by.* . . . With that I sail into the dark; it is my promise of the immortal: teaches me to see immortality for us.' The real worth of life lies in the effort to attain the ideal, and the sense of the reality of that ideal coupled with recognition that the force at the back of Nature is in harmony with it, can show us life beyond the death that ends this life of sense.

But here arises a question of great importance and difficulty. In what precise sense does Meredith mean that life outlasts death? Does he mean to imply personal immortality, or is he only thinking of the effect on other lives springing from the work done and the

life lived by the worker who himself passes utterly away? Passages might be quoted to support either view, but on the whole it seems impossible to explain the triumphant confidence in Nature with which he faces Death on the supposition that it is the end of the individual life :

And O, green bounteous earth !  
 Bacchante Mother ! stern to those  
 Who live not in the heart of mirth ;  
 Death shall I shrink from, loving thee ?  
 Into the breast that gives the rose  
 Shall I with shuddering fall ?

Making all allowance for a poet's metaphors, how can the earth be to him such a mother if she is after all only ' the place of graves ' ? And in the wonderful poem called ' Earth and Man,' he recognises expressly that the desire for permanence and joy, the shrinking from dust as the end, springs from the heart of Nature as much as the impulse to heroic effort.

But no doubt Meredith holds that the veil is not fully lifted. He sees ' the dawn glow through,' but that is all. The faith that he is really concerned to hold to is that it is worth while to go on : that there is ' a heart of eternal goodness to receive ' the dead, ' whatever the nature of the eternal secret may be.' How much is involved in that ' eternal goodness ' he does not care to inquire. What the heroic man has a right to claim for his satisfaction will be granted to him, but he is not yet told what that will be. To refuse to continue the struggle unless a detailed answer can be found means, Meredith thinks, a lack of spiritual vigour. The great mother teaches a patient trust :

And ' If thou hast good faith, it can repose,'  
 She tells her son.

We have simply to do our work,

Leaving her the future task,  
 Loving her too well to ask.

It is not the proof of immortality that can make us feel that life is worth living : it is the sense of its worth that assures us of immortality. Nature whispers to the valiant heart that nothing of real value can perish :

Near is he to great Nature in the thought  
 Each changing season intimately saith,  
 That nought save apparition knows the death ;  
 To the God-lighted mind of man 'tis nought.  
 Close on the heart of Earth his bosom beats,  
 When he the mandate lodged in it obeys,  
 Content to breast a future clothed in haze,  
 Strike camp and onward, like the wind's cloud-fleets.

Such an attitude explains the sternness with which Meredith

speaks of 'the questions.' If they could all be answered, which they cannot be, what ultimate good should we gain? Scientific proof, if it was to be had, of life after death could not give us the inner significance of life itself.

'Strike camp and onward' is really the last word, and sums up Meredith's whole doctrine of purifying toil, while for earnest of immortality he declares—

That from flesh unto spirit man grows  
Even here on the sod under sun.

Where Meredith's teaching fails to satisfy the more orthodox among the thinkers of our time is in its avoidance of personal immortality. No craven avoidance truly; but a cold ignoring of the question as though it did not matter, and indeed, in face of the grander issues of his life's philosophy, it does not matter. The Positivist position might perhaps be likened to Meredith's, were it not that he can glow with a spiritual passion we do not discover in Comte or his followers. Concerning man's aspiration after God he is clear and unequivocal, as in this, an example of many ringing evidences of his faith:

The Great Unseen, nowise the Dark Unknown,  
To whom unwittingly did he aspire  
In wilderness, where bitter was his need:  
To whom in blindness, as an earthly seed  
For light and air, he struck through crimson mire.

But the mind of man so long schooled to dream dreams of a personal immortality, and naturally loth to lose its vision of a happy state in which the individual will continue to exist, purged of the grossness of this earth, is still some way from accepting the Meredithian creed with its light valuation of personality, its splendid enthusiasm for the race. Whether it implies a higher plane of spiritual development to be anxious only for 'man's future as part of the cosmic process,' or for one's own future; ready to make self-sacrifice for the race or merely to assure oneself a happy hereafter, does not seem to be a question capable of much discussion. This, however, the Rev. James Moffat, D.D., makes the point of his criticism of 'Mr. Meredith on Religion' in the *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1905. Dr. Moffat is a sincere and competent critic, and from his point of view his case is admirably stated in the subjoined passage:

While Meredith has no place for the idea of probation which Browning found so fruitful in the argument for immortality, he resembles that poet in the sturdy front which he inculcates as the



*[By permission of Mrs. Horry (quitter).]*

ONE OF MR. LAWRENCE HOUSMAN'S ILLUSTRATIONS FOR  
'JUMP-TO-GLORY JANE'

Those flies of boys disturbed them sore  
With withies cut from hedge or copse,  
They treated them as whipping tops,  
Yet all the flock jumped on the same.



one duty of man towards death. . . . His theory lies open to one just reproach, to the insurgent heave of human passion, which swells out, *e. g.* in Mr. Frederick Myers's poem on 'The Implicit Promise of Immortality.' Take this arresting, august protest, for example :

Oh dreadful thought ! if all our sires and we  
Are but foundations of a race to be,—  
Stones which one thrusts in earth, and builds thereon  
A white delight, a Pæan Parthenon.  
And thither, long hereafter, youth and maid  
Seek with glad brows the alabaster shade,  
And in procession's pomp together bent  
Still interchange their sweet words innocent—  
Not caring that those mighty columns rest  
Each on the rum of a human breast—  
That to the shrine the victor's chariot rolls  
Across the anguish of ten thousand souls.

To Meredith this does not seem a dreadful thought at all. There is, I grant, in the closing words of 'Vittoria' and elsewhere, a slight advance upon some of his earlier utterances, but the passionate assertion of man's future as part of the cosmic progress is never supplemented by any positive or hearty word upon the deathlessness of personality. Such outcries and yearnings, indeed, he can hardly bear with patience or treat as reasonable. Insensibly, I imagine, he is swayed by the semi-pantheistic temper into an undue disparagement of the human personality, as if it necessarily involved some taint or alloy of individualism. So eager is he, as in 'The Lesson of Grief' and 'The Question Whither,' to thwart and erase the lurking selfishness of man, a selfishness which can worm its way into the holiest phases of his being, into love and grief, that he is apt to take too stunted a view of self; with the result that he fails now and then to do any sort of justice to that longing for personal immortality which is as far above any thirsty expectation of reward or fame as it lies remote from any nervous revolt of the senses. It is a longing which tenaciously refuses to admit that human personality which, on Meredith's own showing, forms so vital and supreme an expression of Nature's being, so perfect an organ of her spirit, can be treated as mere material to be eventually used up for greater issues—issues that involve a disintegration of personality and a decline from the level of its consciousness. The general heart will be up in protest. And some will prefer to quote Meredith against himself. They will venture to read humanity in the far future by the ruddy faith of the lines which he devotes to modern France—daring to hope that mankind too,

Like a brave vessel under press of steam,  
Abreast the winds and tides, on angry seas,  
Plucked by the heavens forlorn of present sun,  
Will drive through darkness, and with faith supreme  
Have sight of haven and the crowded quays.

Read 'heaven' for 'haven,' they will plead take the vessel as the purified soul or ego, and then the voyage will satisfy the just, keen intuitions of the human soul. Not otherwise. ~~No lesser freight than personality is worth the passage.~~ When Meredith invites them to launch out with 'the rapture of the forward view,' that is, with an ardent hope for the ultimate, collective welfare of the race, when he exults, in lines of chiselled strength and grace,

With *that* I bear my senses fraught  
Till what I am fast shoreward drives  
They are the vessel of the Thought,  
The vessel splits, the Thought survives,

then they will be dimly conscious that, while it is wise for them to understand, and well for them to assimilate, much else in this great writer's teaching, here he is putting them off with a mist of coloured gleaming words. I or beyond the bar which he summons the soul thus cheerily to cross, it is doubtful if any Pilot is to be met face to face, and more than doubtful if any haven lies for what men learn upon these shores of time and space to prize above all price.

Dr Moffitt's is, of course, the orthodox view, and Meredith is an essential heretic. Yet nothing that the poet-philosopher has written need rob the soul that longs for continuity of that Godward urge, for surely the conduct which he has outlined for man implies as much austerity and self-abnegation as any ever demanded of him by all the prophets of a heaven of many mansions and celestial bliss for the elect. If we think over his 'reiding of earth' as outlined above we shall never be conscious that it runs counter to Christ's teaching, no matter how strangely different it be phrased. Saying Meredith is a heretic, one means, of course, that his attitude is utterly independent of orthodoxy, and that orthodoxy does not imply the teaching of Christ, but the schoolmen's conventionalised interpretation of that teaching. No poet-philosopher of the nineteenth century equals the larger spirits of to-day who are breaking away the lingering trammels of mediævalism from religion such 'driving force of thought' as Meredith has dowered them with in his noble and beautiful philosophy of Nature.

Far from chilling the hopes of the heaven-aspiring soul, Meredith is the rarest tonic that soul can conceive, and simply because he has come to optimism not by shutting his eyes to the misery of the world, not by ignoring the tragedy of life—a greater tragedy than death—but by seeing all and being not afraid. Though it is no doubt true that we should not label Meredith 'optimist' or 'pessimist,' or any other 'ist,' since his view of life is so compre-

hensive, still when Mr. Le Gallienne calls him the only living optimist whose faith carries any conviction he conveys a notion of his outlook which is true so far as a small word can express the general sweep of a great mind facing boldly great problems. Professor M. W. MacCallum does not overstate the sustained 'uplift' of Meredith's philosophy, its consistent note of triumph, its flying banners of conquest, when he writes :

Meredith is terribly in earnest and unflinchingly severe, and every one of his chief persons is measured by the spiritual standard, not by any code of the conventional man, or of the natural man. Yet his books have not the melancholy undertone that we note, say, in the positivist George Eliot; there is no discord audible in them, but a full-toned harmony that subdues the jarring notes, that solemnises, but inspirits and delights. Where George Eliot sees only the irremediable in our acts, their linkage in an iron chain of cause and effect, the infinite generation of evil in a world that, after all, is not spiritual; George Meredith has trust in a power that makes even the wrath and the folly of man to praise it, and so when our misdeeds have been visited with their just reward, he can say over the grave of the erring, 'Earth makes all sweet,' and look for a harvest, not of corruption, but of life. Talking of Shakespeare's profundity of knowledge he says :

Thence came the honeyed corner at his lips,  
The conquering smile wherein his spirit sails.

I should like to apply the words to himself. Like Shakespeare of 'the bitter taste' to those who are at odds with nature, he is also like Shakespeare the 'blind and mild' to those whose spirits are in tune.

Mr. G. K. Chesterton in his paper on 'Some Aspects of George Meredith' (*Great Thoughts*, October, 1904) is, as we might expect from so vigorous a thinker and lusty knight of the pen, impressed particularly by his robust naturalness, and he makes a most interesting comparison between Meredith and Thomas Hardy in his characteristic style, when he writes :

The best example of the basic attitude on philosophy of Meredith, regarding things in general, can be found in his way of dealing with such elements in our civilisation as he conceives to be archaic or cruel, such, for instance, as the benevolent enslavement of women. And the easiest way of bringing this out is to compare him in this matter with another very great man, also a novelist, also an Englishman, and also a man in revolt against many conventions and laws. Thomas Hardy is like Meredith, that thing for



which the words Liberal and Radical are very inadequate synonyms. He is, like Meredith, particularly impressed with the tragedy of the feminine nature under existing conditions. They are both in some sense diagnosing the same problem; they both in some sense trace it to the same disease. And yet their cures are so startlingly opposite that they might be dealing, one with apoplexy, and the other with anæmia. And their two methods, large, distinct, unmistakable, are the two methods which two large, distinct, and unmistakable schools of reformers have from the beginning of the world taken towards what needed reform. When the first shaggy tribesmen differed about how to improve a wicker boat, one was Hardy and the other Meredith.

Let us suppose there is something that is in great need of improvement. Let us suppose it is the primeval wicker boat above mentioned. There is one primeval reformer whose method of reform is this. He stands and points to the boat and says, 'There is a miserable thing for you. Clumsy, unmanageable, a disgrace. I took it out this morning and it leaked in five places. I would as soon go to sea in a sieve. Let us make it better.' And there is another primeval reformer whose method of reform is to stand over the boat and speak strangely thus, 'There is a glorious thing for you; a thing that can drift and swing on the terrible waters that have no end. I took it out this morning and I felt like a god, floating in space. It would be splendid to move on the face of the waters, even in a sieve. This magical invention opens a vista before us; to what lands may we not go? with what swiftness may we not move? What strange fishes may not be in our nets; what strange winds in our sails? Let us make it better.' One says a thing is so bad that it must be improved. The other says it is so good that it must be improved. One is Hardy and the other Meredith.

Continuing his comparison, Mr. Chesterton illustrates it further by showing that while the one reformer would free the slave because his condition is hopeless and degraded, the other would give him liberty because, withal, 'he is a jolly fellow,' worthy of freedom, 'a man like you and me.' Equally the one would emancipate woman because she is downtrodden and kept in ignorance of her potentialities for greatness, and the other because 'even in captivity she is felt to be a queen.' The one argues from her failure, the other from her success. 'The first reformer created Tess, and the and Rose Jocelyn.' Hence in Mr. Chesterton's opinion Meredith is 'a great and powerful paradox; he is an optimistic reformer.'

For a direct pronouncement on religion I turn to Mr. W. T. Stead's character sketch in the *Review of Reviews*, March, 1904, in the course of which he records various conversations he had been

privileged to have with Meredith. What follows is most worth noting here :

Like all serious-minded natures, Mr. Meredith is profoundly religious, although his method of phrasing his convictions would jar somewhat upon the orthodox. One of his grievances is that religion has to suffer a heavy handicap in being saddled with the burden of a multitude of beliefs and myths, which are essentially material. To him the need of presenting a more scientific aspect of religion is just as great as the importance of presenting the Christian ideal was to the Apostles who went forth to combat against the materialised conception of the anthropomorphic paganism. The idols of the market-place, the idols of the temples, have become to his thinking materialised obstacles in the way of a realisation of religion. From the Roman Catholic Church little could be expected in the way of this new reformation, but he thought Protestant ministers ought to set about the task, and especially in drawing a much broader line between the teachings of the Old Testament and the higher and more spiritual revelation of Christ.

'I see,' he said to me, 'the revelation of God to man in the history of the world, and in the individual experience of each of us in the progressive triumph of God, and the working of the law by which wrong works out its own destruction. I cannot resist the conviction that there is something more in the world than Nature. Nature is blind. Her law works without regard to individuals. She cares only for the type. To her, life and death are the same. Ceaselessly she works, pressing ever for the improvement of the type. If man should fail her, she will create some other being; but that she has failed with man I am loath to admit, nor do I see any evidence of it. It would be good for us,' he added thoughtfully, 'if we were to take a lesson from Nature in this respect, and cease to be so wrapped up in individuals, to allow our interests to go out to the race. We should all attain more happiness, especially if we ceased to care so exclusively for the individual I. Happiness is usually a negative thing. Happiness is the absence of unhappiness.'

Apart from religion and ethics, much might be written of Meredith's political faith, though of course that is of a piece with his whole philosophy. Mr. Chesterton has studied him as a reformer, and Mrs. M. Sturge Henderson, as we all know, has even written a book which deals with him chiefly as a reformer. In Mrs. Henderson's article on 'The Forward View' (*Westminster Gazette*, February 12, 1908), she gives the pith of her able and painstaking work. A few brief passages from the article in question will help to give completeness to the present chapter in which I hope no

vital feature of Meredith's teaching has been passed untouched. Mrs. Henderson writes :

Of the nature and growth of Mr. Meredith's political creed after generations, it may be ventured, will be at more pains than our own to inquire. When the history of our latest political development comes to be written, he may be discovered to have predicted and inaugurated it. . . . The story of Mr. Meredith's Radicalism is written in 'Beauchamp's Career.' 'Beauty,' he says of his hero, 'plucked the heart from his breast. But he had taken up arms, he had drunk of the *questioning* cup, that which denieth peace to us, and which projects us on the missionary search of the How, the Wherefore, and the Why not, ever *afterward*. He questioned his justification and yours, for gratifying tastes in an ill-regulated world of wrong-doing, suffering, sin, and bounties unrighteously dispensed—not sufficiently dispersed. He said ~~by and by to pleasure, battle to-day.~~ And the object of battle is to bring beauty to the many ~~instead of the few.~~ . . . A new tide has been setting, new ideals are at work. ~~Society has not as yet control of its limbs;~~ but at least it knows itself as an organism, and can never again feel that the full possibilities of life have been realised in it,

Until from warmth of many breasts, that beat  
A temperate common music, sunlike heat  
The happiness not predatory sheds.

Its watchword henceforth is Community, and the future is in the hands of those who voluntarily unite with the forces that are at work in that direction. . . . The flood of democracy cannot be stayed; but if those with social advantages will but take their place in the fray and not continue to cling to obsolete privileges, the good they will get in exchange for those privileges will more than outweigh the loss of them; so much more than outweigh, Mr. Meredith thinks, that, as soon as the wealthy and powerful can be induced to see the facts, no doubt will remain in their minds as to the relative values :

'By my faith,' he declares, 'there is feasting to come,  
Revelations, delights! . . .  
. . . I can hear a faint crow  
Of the cock of fresh mornings, far, far, yet distinct.'

And this declaration of faith, this assurance of the sound, sweet heart of things, is offered to an age unburdened with consciousness of its capacity for thinking and feeling by a man of incomparable sensitiveness, a man who has faced the thickets of thought and traced impalpable horrors of nerve and sensation down to their lair.

## XIV

### JUDGED BY HIS FELLOW-NOVELISTS

PERHAPS this title is not quite the most accurate, as it suggests a packed jury summoned to pronounce on one of their fellows; and that is no proper description of this chapter. For the most part the 'judgments'—this jury has many voices and no foreman—were not intended by their utterers to have the finality of a verdict. The jury is not so much 'packed' as it is pressed, and I stand guilty of the pressing. It has, however, seemed to me worth while to examine the critical writings and ephemera of Meredith's fellow-novelists with a view to bringing together a selection of opinions which might be held to be interesting as much on account of those who subscribe to them as for their own intrinsic merits; more, perhaps. The unhappy condition of English letters, which forces men, against their inclinations often, to specialise in one particular branch of literary production, has banished that universality which the French, for instance, reasonably account one of their glories. It pays to write novels when once you have caught your public; it pays to write only that particular brand of novel with which you have fluked into popularity; and so we have the melancholy spectacle of many able English writers continually straining to produce new books on the lines of their lucky ones. The English novelists who can or do write decent criticism are singularly few; there are some who, before they won fame with fiction, did write good criticism, and others, again, who have deserted criticism and *belles lettres* to chase the elusive sprite of Fiction none too successfully. The consequence is that, having set myself the theme indifferently expressed by the title of this chapter, diligent research has left me with no great matter to furnish it forth; but even so there is enough of interest to justify its inclusion in the present work.

Where the word 'judged' is scarcely appropriate is in such a case as R. L. Stevenson's perhaps loosely-delivered opinion recorded by a correspondent of the *San Francisco Examiner* in July, 1888, who

had a conversation with the novelist on his setting-out for the South Seas. But what Stevenson then said has often been quoted; and he spoke to this effect :

I am a true blue Meredith person. I think George Meredith out and away the greatest force in English letters, and I don't know whether it can be considered a very encouraging thing that he has now become popular or whether we should think it a very discouraging thing that he should have written so long without any encouragement whatever. It is enough, for instance, to disgust a man with the whole trade of letters that such a book as 'Rhoda Fleming' should have fallen flat; it is the strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died, and if Shakespeare could have read it he would have jumped and cried, 'Here's a fellow!' No other living writer of English fiction can be compared to Meredith. He is the first, and the others—are not he. There is Hardy, of course. I would give my hand to write like Hardy. I have seen sentences of his that I don't think could be bettered in any writer or in any language. Still, I serve under Meredith's colours always.

Stevenson was an enthusiast; he did nothing by halves, but had he been writing a studied criticism instead of entertaining an 'interviewer' he might have given a touch of sobriety to certain of the foregoing phrases. Yet they are warm and hearty, and were no doubt spoken in all sincerity. They are a noble tribute from one great man of letters to another still greater.

Of his fellow-novelists who have passed away and who have written of Meredith, I think few had more potentialities of greatness than David Christie Murray. There was a born story-teller, a man who might have won a real niche of fame, who came within sight of the highest at times and went out a failure. Murray had a splendid forthright style which gave distinction to his somewhat egotistical work, 'My Contemporaries in Fiction,' from which I quote the following characteristic passage :

It is not likely that in the broad sense he will ever become a popular writer, for the mass of novel-readers are an idle and pleasure-loving folk, and no mere idler and pleasure-seeker will read Meredith often or read him long at a time. The little book which the angel gave to John of Patmos, commanding that he should eat it, was like honey in the mouth, but in the belly it was bitter. To the reader who first approaches him, a book of Meredith's offers an accurate contrast to the roll presented by the angel. It is tough chewing, but in digestion most suave and fortifying. The people who instantly enjoy him, who relish him at a first bite, are rare.

From  
Franklin  
Box Hill  
Reading

## Lump-to-Glory Jane

A Resurrection came on Jane,  
The wife of a labouring man  
And put her body trembler sharp,  
Then all the woman was a harp  
With winds along the strings, she heard  
Though there was neither tone nor word

11

For first our hearing was the air,  
Beyond our speaking what it bore



Personally, I am not one of the happy few. I am at my third reading of any one of Meredith's later books before I am wholly at my ease with it. I can find a most satisfying simile (to myself). A new book of Meredith's comes to me like a hamper of noble wines. I know the vintages, and I rejoice. I set to work to open the hamper. It is corded and wired in the most exasperating way, but at last I get it open. That is my first reading. Then I range my bottles in the cellar—port, burgundy, hock, champagne, imperial tokay; subtle and inspiring beverages, not grown in common vineyards, and demanding to be labelled. That is my second reading. Then I sit down to my wine, and that is my third; and in any book of Meredith's I have a cellarful for a lifetime. . . .

Modern science can put the nutritive properties of a whole ox into a very modest canister. Meredith's best sentences have gone through just such a digestive process. He is not for everybody's table, but he is a pride and a delight to the pick of English epicures.

The late James MacLaren Cobban was a novelist of lesser mould than Murray, but a critic of distinction, as those familiar with his work under Henley's banner in the old *Scots Observer* will recall. There he wrote (September 28, 1889) the study of Meredith in the series of 'Modern Men,' and from this I select what follows:

What excellences give George Meredith his peculiar position among his admirers? To speak of them, to examine them is to contend with a great *embarras de richesses*. There are plenty now-a-days to vote the literature of the Rowdy Boy immortal in itself and the wine of life, the only true elixir for every one in mental health. But, the Babel of them notwithstanding, the constant value in fiction is the manifestation of human nature—human nature sounded from the lowest even to the very top of its register. What is commonly called 'character'—character in action—is the perennially interesting thing, and when to character is added right emotion, then the novel may be great. Viewed from this point of vantage the work of Meredith stands fair and full above that of all but the best. What shapes arise as you recall it! Not puppets stuffed and stiff-jointed, not vague and floating shadows, but full-bodied, full-blooded creations, moving in a living world without exaggeration, yet with all the free action of life and instinct with the fire and breath of life! . . .

When George Meredith fails—as in Shrapnel, Old Antony, Mr. Raikes, and the like—he fails prodigiously: not trailing clouds of glory, but running into avalanches of sawdust. But the best of his characters reveal an amazing insight into human nature, and a knowledge wide and deep of the springs of human action. . . . His passion ravishes, and his pathos melts; you would like his good men for friends and neighbours, and the successes among his women for



sweethearts and wives: he is not pre-eminently a humorist, but he sometimes makes you laugh; and if he hath a devil of wit, and would liefer die than submit to exorcism, his wisdom (which is neither of the ascetic nor of the worldling, but of the man who commands the secret of both) instructs, enlightens, even fortifies. As for genius, it is recorded of Thackeray that as he sat writing that immortal scene of Becky and the Marquis and the avenging Rawdon, at a certain instant of creation he slapped his hand upon the table, and said he, 'By — that genius!' Well, such instants are broadcast in Meredith, and when a man can have all these differences in an author, what more can he want for his amusement and delight, what more for his reproof and instruction?

The author of 'Lorna Doone' was very far from being prone to pass judgment on his fellows of the pen, with whom he held less converse than any author of his time, so that the passage from a letter of his quoted by Mr. James Baker in 'Literary and Biographical Sketches' is the more interesting for that reason. Touching the election of Meredith as President of the Authors' Society Blackmore wrote:

I think Meredith was the right man for President, failing Ruskin and Mr. Besant. I should have voted for Meredith. Not that I care for his books, the style is too jerky and tangled, and structure involved, and tone too dictatorial for my liking. Still, he is emphatically an author's author, and the best men admire him beyond all others, and so I conclude that my judgment is wrong.

We have already ascertained Mr. Justin McCarthy's views on certain aspects of Meredith's art, but here I have reserved for quotation a general estimate of the novelist, in which, while we can plainly see a warm admirer of Meredith, Mr. McCarthy steadily refuses to allow his personal pleasure to modify his criticism. We have to remember that what I am about to quote was written in Mr. McCarthy's *Westminster Review* article of July, 1864, and revised for his 'Con Amore' in 1868, thus being a judgment that preceded the writing of 'Harry Richmond,' 'Beauchamp,' 'Diana,' 'Lord Ormont,' and other important works of Meredith's essential to a final verdict. On the other hand Mr. McCarthy was probably familiar with 'Rhoda Fleming,' and as that is unquestionably Meredith's masterpiece *quâ* 'story' he would possibly find little to revise in the following, even after forty years:

His works, as a whole, reveal undoubtedly the operations of a mind endowed with great and genuine power; of a quick, sensitive, feeling nature; of a rich and sometimes a prodigal fancy; of an

intellect highly cultured, and matured by much observation. Still, the books are hardly to be called successful in themselves. They exhibit a combination of faculties entirely above the ordinary range, they are distinguished by a freedom from the commonplace rare indeed in our days; and they have the power to set the reader thinking more often and more deeply than even the productions of greater intellects can always do. But the intellectual man predominates in them; and therefore they are no great works of fiction. The fusing heat of emotion which melts the substances of a novel into one harmonious and fluent whole is wanting. The glow of absolute genius is never felt. The moment of projection never arrives; the several substances never combine into the golden mass; they remain cold, solid and individual to the last. The reader is never carried away by the story; he never loses sight of the narrator, he never for a moment feels as if he were moving among the people of the novel, sharing their trials and their joys. Mr. Meredith falls into the common error of intellectual men who go about to construct a story upon purely intellectual principles. It is not enough to draw men and women with vigorous and life-like touches. Mr. Meredith has done this in many instances with entire success. Emilia is a character wholly new to literature, and painted with consummate skill. Adrian, the Wise Youth of 'Richard Feverel,' is such a picture as Bulwer in his brightest days might have been proud to own. It is not enough to have a keen observance of the shades of human feeling; it is not enough to write eloquently, epigrammatically and pathetically; to have a racy faculty of humour; even to have deep feelings of the capacity to express it in words and scenes. All these faculties, or most of them, are essential to the entire success of a novelist. But besides all these, there is something else needed. These are the ingredients; but there must likewise be the capacity to combine and fuse them into one harmonious whole. There must be, in fact, the story-teller's essential faculty—the capacity to tell a story.

Mr. Meredith always seems to write with a purpose. He is always apparently meditating on some phase of human life, some tendency of human nature, some melancholy confusion or misdirection of human effort; and his whole soul is not in the work itself but in something behind it, and of which it only faintly shadows out the reality and the meaning. He is too much of a thinking man; he needs the spirit which abandons itself wholly to the work, becomes lost in it, and has for the time no *arrière-pensée*, indeed no individual existence apart from it. The critical faculty is too strong in him, and therefore, even when he begins to grow earnest, he forthwith sets about to analyse this very earnestness, and it naturally vanishes in the effort. 'I have never thought about thinking,' says Goethe. Mr. Meredith seems almost always to think about thinking.

Mr. Hall Caine is another novelist who began his career of letters as a critic and speedily deserted criticism for creative literature, as it is called—though why any more ‘creative’ than the best class of criticism it would baffle some novelists to explain—when ‘The Shadow of a Crime’ very honestly won for him a footing in fiction. Since 1885 he has written little by way of criticism, but in ‘The New Watchwords of Fiction,’ in the *Contemporary* of April, 1890, he makes an incidental reference to Meredith that may justify the inclusion of the paragraph here :

We are asked to say how fiction can live against such conditions of the circulating libraries as degrade a serious art to the level of the nursery tale. The answer is very simple : English fiction has lived against them, and produced meantime the finest examples of its art that the literature of the world has yet seen. Unlike the writers who pronounce so positively on the inferiority of fiction in England, I cannot claim to know from ‘back to end’ the great literatures of Europe ; but I will not hesitate to say that not only would the whole body of English fiction bear the palm in a comparison with the whole body of the fiction of any other country, but the fiction of England during the past thirty years (when its degeneracy, according to its critics, has been most marked) has been more than a match for the fiction of the rest of the world. Indeed, I will be so bold as to name six English novels of that period, and ask if any other such bulk of work, great in all the qualities that make fiction eminent—imagination, knowledge of life, passion and power of thought—can be found among the literatures of France, Russia, or America. The six novels are ‘Daniel Deronda,’ ‘The Cloister and the Hearth,’ ‘Lorna Doone,’ ‘The Woman in White,’ ‘The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,’ and ‘Far from the Madding Crowd.’ All these novels are products of romanticism, and the circumstance that they were written amid the hampering difficulties that are said to beset the feet of fiction is proof enough that where power is not lacking in the artist there is no crying need for licence in the art.

In January of the same year as Mr. Hall Caine’s article was published, Dr. Conan Doyle (as we then knew him) contributed a carefully studied paper to the *National Review* on ‘Mr. Stevenson’s Methods in Fiction,’ in the course of which he incidentally throws out a judgment on Meredith when examining how far the elder novelist has influenced the younger, his avowed disciple. He writes as follows :

Meredith was made to be imitated. His mission is not so much to tell stories himself, as to initiate a completely new method in

the art of fiction, to infuse fresh spirit into a branch of literature which was in much need of regeneration. His impatient and audacious genius has refused to be fettered by conventionalities. He has turned away from the beaten and well-trod track, and has cleared a path for himself through thorny and doubtful ways. Such a pioneer would have worked in vain were there not younger men who were ready to follow closely in his steps, to hold what he has gained, and to strike off from it to right and to left. It is a safe prophecy to say that for many generations to come his influence will be strongly felt in fiction. His works might be compared to one of those vast inchoate pyramids out of which new-comers have found materials wherewith to build many a dainty little temple or symmetrical portico. To say that Stevenson was under the influence of Meredith is no more than to say that he wrote in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and was familiar with the literature of his day.

Mr. J. M. Barrie wrote many admirable essays in criticism before the novel claimed his energies, as the stage has later ousted the novel. I have already had occasion to refer to his study of Meredith's novels in the *Contemporary* of October, 1888, and although it is difficult to detach from that any critical summing-up on Meredith's art in general, it is interesting to discover what is Mr. Barrie's opinion of the highest attainment of the novelist in the creation of character. This, concerning Roy Richmond, will serve to show us pretty clearly where Mr. Barrie would place Meredith :

To me Harry Richmond's father is Mr. Meredith's most brilliant creation. What novelist has not worked the 'adventurer'? In Dickens he is a low comedian or a heavy villain, coloured as only the most richly endowed imagination ever novelist had could put on colour, always warranted to draw laughter or a shudder. Thackeray's Barry Lyndon is a more enduring study, one of the author's greatest triumphs, yet Roy Richmond is, I think, a greater. They are in different worlds, and to compare them would be folly. Barry, with all his exaggeration, is the more true to life; he is the adventurer vulgarised till he is human; while Richmond, the fantastic, in fiction the 'greatest, meanest of mankind,' a dreamer of magnificent dreams, one who cannot bring his mind back to the present, is a comedy figure. This dweller in the future is a strangely romantic conception from beginning to end of his wonderful life, and his death is not to be forgotten. The most tenderly pathetic scene in fiction is probably Colonel Newcome's death, but the most impressive is the death of Roy Richmond. Tragedy rings down the curtain. . . . Thackeray admitted that when he had written a

certain great scene in 'Vanity Fair' he felt that it was genius. We are as far as ever from a definition of genius, a word not to be lightly used, but there are some unmistakable instances of it, and I cannot think that Roy Richmond is not one of them.

Mr. George Moore, the author of 'Esther Waters,' in his 'Confessions of a Young Man,' published in 1888, tells us that he had been an admirer of Meredith's poetry, but when he turned to his prose and took up 'The Tragic Comedians,' expecting for the poet's novels one of his 'old passionate delights,' he was 'painfully disappointed.' He conditions his criticism, however, by observing that 'emotionally' he does not understand Meredith and 'all except an emotional understanding is worthless in art.' He seems dimly to recognise him as a personality, but the reading of his prose makes him feel so hopelessly out of sympathy with the author that he doubts if he can criticise him in the true sense. Clearly it is the Meredithian 'style' that is to blame, in the first place, as Mr. Moore goes on to say:

In Balzac, which I know by heart, in Shakespeare, which I have just begun to love, I find words deeply impregnated with the savour of life; but in George Meredith there is nothing but crackjaw sentences, empty and unpleasant in the mouth as sterile nuts. I could select hundreds of phrases which Mr. Meredith would probably call epigrams, and I would defy any one to say they were wise, graceful or witty. I do not know any book more tedious than 'Tragic Comedians,' more pretentious, more blatant; it struts and screams, stupid in all its gaud and absurdity as a cockatoo. More than fifty pages I could not read. . . .

I took up 'Rhoda Fleming.' I found some exquisite bits of description in it, but I heartily wished them in verse, they were motives for poems; and there was some wit. I remember a passage very racy indeed, of middle-class England. Antony, I think is the man's name, describes how he is interrupted at his tea; a paragraph of seven or ten lines with 'I am having my tea, I am at my tea,' running through it for refrain. Then a description of a lodging-house dinner: 'a block of bread on a lonely plate, and potatoes that looked as if they had committed suicide in their own steam.' A little ponderous and stilted, but undoubtedly witty. I read on until I came to a young man who fell from his horse, or had been thrown from his horse, I never knew which, nor did I feel enough interest in the matter to make research; the young man was put to bed by his mother, and once in bed he began to talk! . . . four, five, six, ten pages of talk, and such talk! I can offer no opinion why Mr. George Meredith committed them to paper; it is not narrative, it is not witty, nor is it sentimental, nor is it

profound. I read it once; my mind astonished at receiving no sensation cried out like a child at a milkless breast. I read the pages again . . . did I understand? Yes, I understood every sentence, but they conveyed no idea, they awoke no emotion in me; it was like sand, arid and uncomfortable. The story is surprisingly commonplace—the people in it are as lacking in subtlety as those of a Drury Lane melodrama.

‘Diana of the Crossways’ Mr. Moore liked better, and, had he been absolutely idle, might have read it through; but judged by the final test of all fiction, ‘the creation of a human being,’ he found it a failure. ‘Into what shadow has not Diana floated?’ he exclaims. He does not state how far he bore her company, but perhaps the suggestion is that if she could not induce him to follow her to the end she was indeed a phantom. He could find nothing in the work to be mentioned with Balzac; an opinion to which many sincere admirers of Meredith might be willing to subscribe. And he thus pronounces on the novelist’s failure—as he considers it—to realise the character of Diana :

With tiresome repetition we are told that she is beautiful, divine; but I see her not at all, I don’t know if she is dark, tall, or fair; with tiresome reiteration we are told that she is brilliant, that her conversation is like a display of fireworks, that the company is dazzled and overcome; but when she speaks the utterances are grotesque, and I say that if any one spoke to me in real life as she does in the novel, I should not doubt for an instant that I was in the company of a lunatic.

There is a certain charm of style about Mr. Moore’s very frank expression of his dislike for Meredith, and modified as it all is by his avowed lack of sympathy with, and his emotional distance from, the object of his criticism—a premise difficult of admission—it might still pass for an attempt at criticism; but when he roundly declares that ‘Mr. Meredith’s conception of life is crooked, ill-balanced, and out of tune,’ even the most lukewarm Meredithian will protest that Mr. Moore might at least have read several of the novels to the bitter end—so to say—before venturing on a generalisation so sweeping and unsupportable. Yet withal, after suggesting that Mr. Meredith resembles a man who does a lot of shouting and gesticulating but utters little worthy of notice, he can find it in his heart to call him an artist. ‘His habit is not slatternly,’ he writes, ‘like those of such literary hodmen as Mr. David Christie Murray, Mr. Besant, Mr. Buchanan. There is no trace of the crowd about him. I do

not question his right of place. I am out of sympathy with him, that is all; and I regret that it should be so, for he is one whose love of art is pure and untainted with commercialism, and if I may praise it for nought else, I can praise it for this.'

There is some very sound criticism in 'Letters to Living Authors,' which Mr. John A. Steuart wrote eighteen years ago, ere he, too, deserted the art of criticism for that of fiction. Mr. Steuart addresses seventeen English and American authors then living, of whom ten have now passed away, and the place of honour is given to Meredith. In Mr. Steuart's views of Meredith there is nothing particularly fresh to any one who has followed the whole stream of criticism so closely as we have in this work; but he writes so engagingly, putting certain long-accepted opinions in a new and effective way, that I venture on the following quotation from his 'letter':

You have been quixotical enough to remain steadfastly true to your early ideals. You have given the world, not what it wanted, but what you thought was good for it. You have put intellect into every sentence you have written, reckless of consequences, therein departing very far indeed from the glorious traditions of English fiction. To say the truth, I think you have been too lofty in your contempt of the rights and prerogatives of that well-meaning and not ill-deserving, in not very intelligent, individual, the habitual novel-reader. Other novelists may occasionally take the bit between their teeth, as it were, and indulge in a gallop to please themselves, but they quickly slacken down to the conventional ambling pace, and make everything comfortable for the party in the saddle. To change the metaphor, they mostly dilute their draught of thought to suit the taste of consumers; but you stubbornly persist in forever giving yours over-proof, perfectly indifferent if people turn away gasping. That is not the way to be popular, and indeed you are at opposite poles from one's ideal of a popular writer.

Your only commodity is thought, which is not in any great demand in the present era. You made a mistake at the beginning, and, less discriminating than many who are your inferiors, you have never seen it. All along you have gone on the assumption that the world is craving for more light, whereas it is rather obscurity and forgetfulness it is seeking. You fancied that on certain weighty and perplexing problems, which lay very near your heart, mankind was pining for enlightenment, and, with the noble audacity of a generous and gifted soul, you undertook to make things clear; and you have succeeded but too well. That is, you have led the reading public to understand that you are a moral and social reformer, and not a story-teller. But for the ample proof to the contrary contained

in your works, your policy might lead one to think that you know little or nothing of human nature. Your course, in a worldly sense, has been the height of inexpediency. . . . When writers, without a twentieth part of your gifts or your culture, have been shooting aloft into fortune, and what is temporarily taken for fame, you have remained toiling in comparative obscurity, no doubt eagerly panting for appreciation, yet determined to bate not one jot of your independence, or in the smallest particular prove a traitor to your ideal. Happily there are signs that the long-delayed victory is coming at last, that you are gaining recognition, or, to use a cant phrase of criticism, that you 'are swimming into the ken of culture.'

In Mr. Coulson Kernahan's remarkable and beautiful book, 'A Dead Man's Diary,' I find the following noteworthy passage:

I do not know whether the literary associations of the room had any part—probably they had—in determining the current of my thought, but I remember that, during the first few hours of the morning preceding my death, I found my mind running on poets and poetry. I recollect that I was thinking chiefly of Rossetti, and of the fact that he was haunted, as he lay a-dying, by passages from his own poems. Not that I saw or see any cause in that fact for wonder, for I can recall lines of his which I can believe would haunt one even in heaven.

Those of my readers who fail to appreciate in its fulness the saying of 'Diana of the Crossways,' that in poetry 'those that have souls meet their fellows,' or that of the *Saturday Review*, that 'there is an incommunicable magic in poetry which is foolishness to the multitude,'—may think this an exaggeration. Ah well, they are of the 'multitude,'—the more pity for them!—and can never understand how the soul is stirred by a simple sentence in the godlike language of Shakespeare, or is as irresistibly swayed as are trees in a whirlwind by a single stanza from Swinburne; how the magic witchery of a couplet by Keats can bring tears to the eyes; or how the tender grace of a line from Herrick can set the senses vibrating with an exquisite thrill of joy. Nay, I could indicate sentences in the diamond-pointed prose of George Meredith, pellucid sentences, crystal-clear and luminous as the scintillations of Sirius (and for all their judicial poise and calmness emitted like the Sirius scintillations at a white heat), which affect me in a similar way. There are few other writers of whom I could affirm this with the like confidence; but Meredith's thoughts have crystallised into a brain-stimulating prose—every sentence of which is a satisfying mouthful to our intellectual hunger—which is sometimes pure poetry.

Mr. Neil Munro, the author of 'John Splendid,' writes as follows in the course of a study of Meredith in *Britannia*, July, 1904:



The hour of perfect harmony, when inspiration, argument, and style were in the happiest accord, seems to have come to Mr. Meredith, when—that amazing corybantic Eastern performance, 'The Shaving of Shagpat,' accomplished, doubtless to the artistic joy and profit of himself, if not very much to the edification of the early fifties—he tamed his heart of fire and produced 'Richard Feverel.' The world, which, given an adequate period for reflection, is always right in its estimates of art, has, in half a century, grown to love 'Richard Feverel' above all others of Mr. Meredith's books, and I think it will remain obstinately in that preference, despite the hectorings and the lecturings of the professional critic. We listen patiently to the protestations of the elect that the later Meredith is obscure only for indolent and unable intellects, and that his early work was tentative; we confess the marvellous nature of his analysis of a complex Society, the mordant wit of his dialogues, the truth of his observations of the mind of man and woman, and the uniqueness of his imagination, all as displayed in the noble array of books that stand to his credit, but it does not alter our conviction that his golden hour was the hour of 'Richard Feverel,' when he wrote of love from a full young heart, and cherished his feelings more than his phrases.

In 'Richard Feverel' we have the essence of all the author's gifts as a novelist. It is a story flowing with spring winds, odorous with flowers, touched with Pagan delight in earth and rude elemental things, abounding, despite its tragic conclusion, in that grave optimism which is not wanting in his very latest work. . . . 'Richard Feverel' also indicated the danger into which its creator was apt to fall. The lucidity of its telling was sometimes marred—as we must humbly think—by a device of concealing the most ordinary information in fantastical language.

Withal he remains the most brilliant and ingenious novelist of his age. . . . In the work of no other novelist is conversation so consistently pitched on a high key and so limited to the essentials. The right instinct for a dramatic situation is ever his, and there is rich arterial blood in all his characters.

Another of the younger generation of novelists, Mr. H. B. Marriott Watson, thus sums up a brief study of Meredith published in the *Daily Mail*, November 2, 1907:

Our conceptions of fiction have sensibly altered during the last sixty years, yet we do not judge the pioneers of the Grand Manner by our later canons. We keep Dickens and Thackeray upon their pedestals, as we do Scott and Fielding. George Meredith is in the same category. In the face of his construction, or his mannerisms, or his volubility, for instance, we are mute. All that matters is the light and life that leap from his pages. It is an affair of genius

only, where animadversion of mere manner or style fails. We judge him by his galleries, the great dramaturgist of our times. And never was there so vast and varied an assemblage since Shakespeare. Do you remember the Miss Poles? And do you remember Lucy? And do you remember Rhoda? . . . A great range of diverging womanhood lies between these extremes. And in the last resort one must judge a novelist by his women. Their creation is his greatest task.

With the foregoing opinions of his fellow-novelists before us, it is more than ever evident how completely Meredith had won his fellows of the pen to his side. As Shelley was called the poets' poet, so may Meredith be named the novelists' novelist.

## XV

### HIS PLACE IN LITERATURE

WE can hope to define this only so far as criticism may be prophetic, no more. This is not a great way, it will be said; but it is as far as erring man may go, reasoning from premises which he establishes too often to suit the end he aims at. Yet criticism as a whole is by no means so futile in its forecasts as the critic in his bilious moods would have us believe, excepting always himself—and perhaps St. Beuve!—as papal in his infallibility. Nor is English criticism in a bad way just now, any more than it was when Meredith first assaulted its exponents with his new creed and his newer expression thereof. There are times when I am tempted—as one who has read not a little in modern criticism—to think that the standard of English critical writing in our country has been equal to that of the creative literature during the last half century. To-day, indeed, it is not too much to say that the criticism of prose fiction is on the whole superior to the literature it examines. Take a review of the latest novel in the *Times*, or the *Westminster Gazette*, or in almost any of the better-class dailies, and you will probably find it is written with more literary grace, a finer savour of style, a wider acquaintance with letters, than you will discover in the book it criticises, perhaps appreciatively. There is a notion gaining ground that if a man can ‘spin a yarn’ he is a better fellow than the ablest critic, even though he does not know the rudiments of grammar and could not save his neck, were he put to it, by composing a paragraph of decent English. To this pass has the amazing popularity of the novel brought us, so that a word for criticism would be in season.

But to return to the subject in hand, it may be said that whatever failures in prophecy can be laid at the door of literary criticism, out of the glowing mass of opinions we can always strike shape into something that will stand for the essence of these opinions and provide ourselves with an approximation to truth, or at least to wisdom, which itself only approximates to truth. That is what I

purpose attempting here; but in an effort of this kind the reader must co-operate by forming for himself some general opinion from the views it is my task to bring together. If, at the end, the reader finds an idea disengage itself from the whole that refuses to join hands with the main idea I have taken from the same source, I shall say no more than that the 'personal equation,' which makes it impossible for two men to give precisely the same report of the same occurrence half-an-hour after it happened, operates here, as it does throughout the whole field of critical opinion.

Swinburne is a good judge to start with. In 'A Note on Charlotte Brontë,' published in 1877, he wrote :

Perhaps we may reasonably divide all imaginative work into three classes : the lowest, which leaves us in a complacent mood of acquiescence with the graceful or natural inventions and fancies of an honest and ingenious workman, and in no mind to question or dispute the accuracy of his transcript from life or the fidelity of his design to the modesty and the likelihood of nature ; the second, of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent. . . . Of the second order our literature has no more apt and brilliant examples than George Eliot and George Meredith.

Oscar Wilde, in one of his subtlest essays, that on 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (*Fortnightly*, February, 1891), in a few deft and telling touches gives the verdict of one man of genius on another thus :

One incomparable novelist we have now in England, Mr. George Meredith. There are better artists in France, but France has no one whose view of life is so large, so varied, so imaginatively true. There are tellers of stories in Russia who have a more vivid sense of what pain in fiction may be. But to him belongs philosophy in fiction. His people not merely live, but they live in thought. One can see them from myriad points of view. They are suggestive. There is soul in them and around them. They are interpretative and symbolic. And he who made them, those wonderful quickly-moving figures, made them for his own pleasure, and has never asked the public what they wanted, has never cared to know what they wanted, has never allowed the public to dictate to him or influence him in any way, but has gone on intensifying his own personality, and producing his own individual work. At first none came to him. That did not matter. Then the few came to him. That did not change him. The many have come now. He is still the same. He is an incomparable novelist.

Two years earlier the same critic had written of the same novelist in a colloquy which is famous as one of the most brilliant examples of his style and went far to establish his fame as a writer of paradox. I refer, of course, to 'The Decay of Lying,' contributed by Oscar Wilde to the *Nineteenth Century*, January, 1889, and reprinted in 'Intentions.' Subjoined are the paragraphs of immediate import:

*Cyril.* . . . I also cannot help expressing my surprise that you have said nothing about the two novelists whom you are always reading, Balzac and George Meredith. Surely they are realists, both of them?

*Vivian.* Ah! Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate. Somebody in Shakespeare—Touchstone, I think—talks about a man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit, and it seems to me that this might serve as the basis for a criticism of Meredith's method. But whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal, and after all, even if the man's fine spirit did not revolt against the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at a respectful distance. By its means he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses.

Again, in 'The Critic as Artist,' in the same volume, occurs this most characteristic deliverance of Wilde's, though he places it in the mouth of a lay figure:

Yes, Browning was great. And as what will he be remembered? As a poet? Ah, not as a poet! He will be remembered as a writer of fiction, as the most supreme writer of fiction, it may be, that we have ever had. His sense of dramatic situation was unrivalled, and, if he could not answer his own problems, he could at least put problems forth, and what more should an artist do? Considered from the point of view of a creator of character he ranks next to him who made Hamlet. Had he been articulate, he might have sat beside him. The only man who can touch the hem of his garment is George Meredith. Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose.

Turn we now for a moment from the dazzle of Wilde's paradox, his wise and allowable affectations, his studied cleverness enclosing genuine criticism, to a forthright critic of the old-fashioned 'plain-

Jane-and-no-nonsense ' school—the late H. D. Traill. So long ago as 1875—when 'Beauchamp's Career' was appearing in the *Fortnightly*—he wrote as follows, in the *Nineteenth Century* of October, on 'The Novel of Manners':

The novel of modern life and society, in so far as it does not rely for its attractions on mere sensational incident, is generally a study of male and female character—mostly, indeed, of one male and one female character—with a few elaborate sketches of scenery for a background, and a clumsy caricature of some two or three well-known contemporary personages thrown in to give it an air of actuality. The close objective study of social *types*—not of their superficial peculiarities only, but of their inner being—appears to be becoming a lost art. Where, indeed, are we to look for the observation, the humour, to say nothing of the *wisdom*, which was brought to bear upon this branch of the art of fiction by its great masters in the past? We have but one living novelist with the adequate intellectual equipment; but Mr. George Meredith is poet, philosopher and politician, as well as novelist, and we must be satisfied, I suppose, that brilliant studies of manners form an element, and an element only, in his varied and stimulating work. For the rest, we have 'pretty' writers in abundance, and a few of genuine power in the creation of individual character. But the generalising eye, the penetrative humour, and the genial breadth of sympathy, which is needed to portray the social pageant as a whole, appear to be gifts which are becoming rarer and rarer among us every day.

The comparison with Browning which Oscar Wilde made so neatly is perhaps the commonest of the commonplaces of Meredith criticism. The late James Thomson ('B. V.') in an essay on the occasion of the one volume issue of 'Richard Feverel' advanced it thus, in *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, May, 1879:

He may be termed, accurately enough, for a brief indication, the Robert Browning of our novelists; and his day is bound to come, as Browning's at length has come. The flaccid and feeble folk, who want literature and art that can be inhaled as idly as the perfume of a flower, must naturally shrink from two such earnestly strenuous spirits, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions, in whom, to use the magnificent and true language of Coleridge concerning Shakespeare, 'The intellectual power and the creative energy wrestle as in a war-embrace.' But men who have lived and observed and pondered, who love intellect and genius and genuine passion, who have eyes and ears ever open to the mysterious miracles of nature and art, who flinch not from keenest insight into the world and life, who are wont to probe and analyse with patient subtlety

the intricate social and personal problems of our complex quasi-civilisation, who look not to mere plot as the be-all and end-all of a novel reflecting human character and life, who willingly dispense with the childish sugar-plums of so-called poetical justice which they never find dispensed in the grown-up work-o'-day world, who can with thought to thought, and passion to passion, and imagination to imagination; and, lastly, who can appreciate a style vital and plastic as the ever-evolving living world it depicts, equal to all the emergencies, which can revel with clowns and fence with fine ladies and gentlemen, yet rise to all grandeurs of Nature and Destiny and the human soul in fieriest passion and action: such men, who cannot abound anywhere, but who should be less rare among meditative smokers than in the rest of the community, will find a royal treasure-house of delight and instruction and suggestion in the works of George Meredith.

Whereas Browning is esteemed a prosateur struggling with poetry for his medium, Mr. Arthur Symonds would have it that Meredith is a poet trammelled by prose, if I correctly interpret the concluding paragraph of his 'Note on George Meredith' in the *Fortnightly*, November, 1897. And observe the recurrence of the Browning comparison in Mr. Justin McCarthy's estimate of Meredith in 'A History of Our Times,' from which I quote below the general reference only and not the finely condensed appreciation of 'Beauchamp's Career':

Distinct, peculiar, and lonely is the place in fiction held by Mr. George Meredith, the author of 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' 'Beauchamp's Career,' 'The Egoist,' and other novels. Mr. Meredith has been more than once described as a prose Browning. He has indeed much of Mr. Browning's obscurity of a style, not caused by any obscurity of thought, but rather by a certain perverse indifference on the part of the artist to the business of making his meaning as clear to others as it is to himself. He has a good deal of Mr. Browning's peculiar kind of grim Saturnine humour, not the humour that bubbles and sparkles—the humour that makes men laugh even while it sometimes draws tears to the eyes. He lacks the novelist's first charm, the power of telling a story well. But, despite these defects, he is unquestionably one of the most remarkable of all the modern novelists, short of the very greatest.

Mr. Herbert Paul has naturally a good deal to say of Meredith in 'The Apotheosis of the Novel under Queen Victoria,' contributed to the *Nineteenth Century*, May, 1897, but his generalisations rather than the detail of his criticism are here in point and as a contribution to the subject in hand I quote the following:



l q l l

# THE MIFING

H rlorl rll al l rlu p l  
 H v rll l l l l l  
 l r l a t a w t f l l k a l  
 A l l l w t t l r v

q M





Mr. George Meredith has long stood, as he deserves to stand, at the head of English fiction. . . . His style is not a classical one. But it suits Mr. Meredith, as Carlyle's and Browning's suited them, because it harmonises with his thought. Nobody says that Mr. Meredith's strong point was the simple and perspicuous narrative of events. He is not in the least like Wilkie Collins. He is not like anybody, except perhaps Peacock. But he is a great master of humour, of fancy, of sentiment, of imagination, of everything that makes life worth having. He plays upon human nature like an old fiddle. He knows the heart of a woman as he knows the mind of a man. His novels are romances, and not 'documents.' They are often fantastic, but never prosy. He does not see life exactly as the wayfaring man sees it. The 'realist' cannot understand that that is a qualification and not a disability. A novel is not a newspaper. 'Mr. Turner,' said the critical lady, 'I can never see anything in nature like your pictures.' 'Don't you wish you could, ma'am?' growled the great artist. Mr. Meredith has the insight of genius and of poetical genius. But he pays the reader the compliment of requiring his assistance. Some slight intellectual capacity and a willingness to use it are required for the appreciation of his books. They are worth the trouble.

'How much of Mr. Meredith will our children read?' asks Mr. W. L. Courtney in the *Fortnightly* of June, 1886, and proceeds thus to answer his own question:

Perhaps two or three novels at most—'Evan Harrington,' 'Richard Feverel,' and 'Diana of the Crossways.' Even these we can hardly imagine entering into their life, as 'Romola' and 'Adam Bede' have into ours. For towards Mr. Meredith we always must have a certain reserve; he does not come into the heart, we are still out of doors. Yet his is a powerful mind, full of philosophic culture. Some of his sayings will not leave us, even though the total impression be forgotten. This is just what might be expected in the case of a clever student of life, whose analytic power has been fostered at the expense of constructive art.

But if we wish to discover where enthusiasm would place Meredith, we have only to turn to Mr. Richard Le Gallienne, of all his critics the most constant in his admiration. Writing in the *Novel Review*, May, 1892, he says:

The fundamental element of great work is passion. It is that which vitalises all the rest—the creative passion, whether it be poetic or humorous or what, the gusto with which an artist first dreams, and then translates his dream into his chosen material.

This passion still heaves like a bosom in great books. A man

with a bounteous, enthusiastic temperament puts his life at its highest moments into them, and there it will go on beating so long as books exist—just as he himself had gone on had his body been but as durable a material as a book. . . . With this passion Mr. Meredith's books tingle from end to end.

The other fundamental quality of great work is what we call humanity. That is, man is presented in proper relationship to his environment, to the earth below and the heaven above; neither is forgotten, neither is exaggerated. No essential condition or characteristic is ignored.

Whatever subtleties of evolution may be the artist's theme, he must never forget that they have developed 'under the sun,' in the face of an infinite mystery, and from roots in earth. We must recognise the characters as beings, however different in developments from ourselves, as having the same origin, compounded of the same element, and as having the same destiny. We must be quite sure that they are flesh and blood, and not flesh and water. . . . Now Mr. Meredith's work fulfils this condition also. . . .

After passion and humanity, the common qualities of great work, of course, the other qualities depend on the individual. Whether his theme shall be the tragedy or comedy or mere beauty of existence, or all three, chances according to the gifts of the artist. The greater imitate life itself in combining all in their works, and certainly Mr. Meredith is of these. It is hard to say whether as a poet or a humorist he is most notable; indeed, it is unnecessary, for he is in no small degree both.

Mr. Meredith is indeed singularly complex.

He unites in a quite remarkable degree high powers as a poet, a humorist, a thinker, and a wit, all subserved, with the exception of five very small volumes of verse, to his work as a novelist. This complexity gives his novels their exceptional piquancy of appeal, for, as, perhaps, no other English novelist ever did, he sees a character or situation from every different point of view at once. His mind is, so to say, a prism which subdivides the primary aspect of such character and situation into all its subordinate aspects, though he is far too artistic not to respect the dominant impression. This, of course, is the true realism. Thus Mr. Meredith is always convincing.

It is clear from this where Mr. Le Gallienne would pinnacle his Meredith; the pedestal would be only a little lower than Shakespeare's, but lower, for he has said that he is one of those who 'could not love their Meredith so well loved they not Shakespeare more.' Mr. J. M. Barrie writes always, as we might expect, with a shade more reserve and yet we cannot suppose that his admiration for Meredith is a degree less warm than Mr. Le Gallienne's. The

conclusion of his study of the novels in the *Contemporary*, October, 1888, is noteworthy. There Mr. Barrie writes :

In this paper I have confined myself to Mr. Meredith's prose works, and I believe they will outlive his poetry. As to how many generations they will go down to, I shall make no predictions. Mr. Stevenson, with the audacity of a generous spirit chafing at the comparative neglect which has been the lot of his master, calls 'Rhoda Fleming' the 'strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died.' I shall only say that Mr. Meredith is one of the outstanding men of letters since the Elizabethan age, and that, without dethroning Scott, he is among the great English writers of fiction. We have a novelist of genius with us still. The others had their failings as he has, and, if the future will refuse to find room for so many works as he offers it, one may question whether it will accept theirs. To say that he is a wit is not to pronounce the last word. He is the greatest of the wits, because he is greater than his wit.

But if we want a finely-tempered judgment by way of counterpoise to Mr. Le Gallienne's—though I am by no means wishful to belittle the ardent appreciation of that most engaging writer, since one can admire enthusiasm even where differing from its opinions—one cannot do better than turn to Mr. W. C. Brownell, who sums up Meredith as follows in 'Victorian Prose Masters':

He stands quite apart from and unsupported by the literary fellowship which is a powerful agent in commending any writer to the attention of either the studious or the desultory. He cannot be placed. He has no derivation and no tendency. His works inhere in no larger category. He gains nothing from ancestry or association. He fills no *lacunæ*, supplements no incompleteness, supplants no predecessor. He is so wholly *sui generis* that neglect of him involves neglect of nothing else, implies no deficiency of taste, no literary limitedness. Failure to appreciate him is no impeachment of one's catholicity. If he has a philosophy he is too original to let it be perceived; if he has even a point of view he is too original to preserve it long enough for the reader to catch. The whole current of the literature of his day has flowed by him without apparently awakening any impulse on his part to stem or accelerate it, without even attracting from him more than the interested glance of the spectator. . . . He is too large a figure to be obscured even by his own 'originality,' on the one hand, or, on the other, to be belittled by the extravagant admiration of 'the elect.' He has written many novels and not one that does not furnish brilliant evidence of remarkable powers. His poetry is a secondary affair altogether, whatever its value, and it is as a novelist

that he ranks in the literature of his time. And as a novelist it may be claimed and must be conceded that his position is not only unique, as I have said, but of very notable evidence. What other writer deserves to rank with Thackeray and George Eliot in the foremost files of Victorian fiction?—I do not mean for extraordinary genius, like Dickens's, or for dramatic psychology, such as Mr. Hardy's, but for his 'criticism of life.'

The foregoing is criticism of the best kind, which faces the defects of a great master boldly and discovers his greatness in spite of the prickly hedges he has himself set about it. It has this advantage over the praise of the enthusiast, that, being based upon a deliberate and dispassionate investigation, it is less liable to the slings and arrows of the adverse and antipathetic. It is rock-built, less beautiful than the illuminated shrine of the devotee, but weather-proof. Mr. Brownell's judgment runs, on the whole, pretty evenly with that of his fellow-countryman, the late George Parsons Lathrop, but the latter was perhaps a step or two farther on the way to be a 'true blue Meredith man.'

The judgments of certain of the younger critics now fall to be recorded, and perhaps none is more strikingly conveyed than that of Mr. G. K. Chesterton, who writes as follows in his essay, 'Aspects of Meredith,' from which quotation has already been made :

Amidst and yet above this vast general drift towards mere differentiation, towards mere moods and manners, towards a sort of psychological Barnum show, stand two or three great men out of the age of the giants. They have all the interest of the moderns in the fascinating divisions, in the beautiful incongruities between man and man. But they still retain, out of a greater time, a greater memory. They remember this, that however deep, however wild, however baffling and bizarre be the difference between man and man, still it is a difference between man and man, not a difference between centaur and hobgoblin, between a mermaid and a hippogriff, between a kelpie and a dragon. Of these great men, the links between all that was good in the old philosophy of man and all that is good in the new study of men, the greatest is George Meredith. . . . Meredith stands alone in combining with his minutiae and insight that ancient sense of human fraternity which makes him like Scott and Dickens and Fielding, more a brother to his villains than the modern novelist can be to his hero.

Mr. James Douglas, one of the most brilliant of the younger

critics, with an unfortunate tendency to pursue a paradox careless of whither it will lure him, as may be noted in his study of Meredith in the *Morning Leader* on the occasion of the eightieth birthday, expresses in the following paragraph an opinion with which many critics concur :

The best in him comes out in his poetry, for there he breaks free from literary convention. 'Modern Love' is truer than many of his novels, for in those marvellous sonnets he faces the torture and torment of the human mind caught in the labyrinth of romance. But, like Disraeli, he is in his novels always on the side of the angels, and he seldom works out a situation to the bitter end. He has, like all the romancers, the cowardice of his convictions, and the convictions of his cowardice. He might have cut more deeply into the carcase of life if he had been writing in German or French or Russian or Norwegian, but he has never forgot the gaunt spectre of Philistian convention behind him, moderating and diluting and controlling his thought. He is, in spite of everything in him that makes for conformity, far in advance of his day, and he has a strong, resolute strain of dauntless Liberalism in his blood, which breaks out finely at intervals. His place as a novelist is not quite easy to fix. One feels that he is likely to become, like Browning, a bookshelf classic. But even that dusty immortality is not given to many mortals.

But in all the surge of criticism which burst upon us, flood-like, on February 12, 1908, I recall nothing that summarised with more point the distinguishing feature of Meredith, the tangible 'something' by which we can contrive to give him his 'place' in the great hierarchy of English letters, than a short letter, signed 'E. S. G.,' to the editor of the *Spectator*, in its issue of February 29. Who the writer may be I do not know, but his little note on 'Mr. Meredith's Modernism' distinctly calls for quotation here :

In your reference to Mr. Meredith's birthday (*Spectator*, February 15) you suggest one peculiarity in the work of our greatest living novelist which explains why recognition has come to him so tardily. 'His life spanned the whole Victorian age,' and yet he has never represented that age. In the nineteenth century he stood alone. His kindred will not be found in his great contemporaries—Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Tennyson—but in Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. He is their lineal descendant, and if we can find a parent for any work so distinctly original as his, we can find it in Fielding. Even his titles have an eighteenth-century ring—e. g. 'The Adventures of Harry Richmond,' 'Beauchamp's Career,'

'Lord Ormont and his Aminta.' His is not the actual eighteenth-century manner; it is an evolution of the eighteenth century, sublimated and impregnated with French charm and lightness. If the Fielding novel had continued on its own lines, and had not been diverted, partly through the influence of women writers, it would have evolved into something like the characteristic Meredithian novel—i. e. fictitious biography, chapters of a great *Comédie Humaine*. Yet Mr. Meredith has always been more 'modern' than the Victorians. He joins the eighteenth to the twentieth century as if there never had been a Victorian gap. From the date of his earliest novels he anticipated what we understand to-day by Modernism. The Victorian age was one of idealism and spirituality, of sentiment that at its best was exalted and noble, and at its worst was sentimentality. Heart was even more important than brain in the world of Dickens and George Eliot. There was a stronger sense of the seriousness than of the humour of life. Religion or religious philosophy was an important element. Mr. Meredith reacted against nearly every trait of his own times, and in reacting towards the past he produced a new type, a future, which has already become the present with us. The qualities he especially emphasises are strength with power, and, above all, brains. The head rules the heart; 'soul,' if such an obsolete term may pass, does not appear. The most distinctive feature of the style is polished, and yet genial, satire. Sentiment and emotion are drawn as weakness and follies; sentimentality is the cardinal sin. Instead of idealism he gives us almost scientific naturalism, and the love passion is frankly physical. Most of these traits are the common property of our twentieth-century writers. They, too, have reverted in many ways to the Fielding age, partly, no doubt, under Mr. Meredith's influence. Intensely modern he may be, but he has always been intensely un-Victorian.

I have kept for final quotation the judgment of a critic who might equally have been the first of our authorities, but whom I have designed to be the last because he is unexcelled among Meredith's critical exponents, the least prejudiced, the best admiring and the most unsparing. Thus Henley's words coming last will emphasise and underline much of what precedes them. Assuredly the true voice of criticism speaks in such a passage as this from 'Views and Reviews,' originally written for the *Athenæum*, November 1, 1879:

To read Mr. Meredith's novels with insight is to find them full of the rarest qualities in fiction. If their author has a great capacity for unsatisfactory writing, he has capacities not less great for writing that is satisfactory in the highest degree. He has the tragic

instinct and endowment, and he has the comic as well; he is an ardent student of character and life; he has wit of the swiftest, the most comprehensive, the most luminous, an humour that can be fantastic or ironical or human at his pleasure; he had passion and he has imagination; he has considered sex—the great subject, the leaven of imaginative art—with notable audacity and insight. He is as capable of handling a vice or an emotion as he is of managing an affectation. He can be trivial, or grotesque, or satirical, or splendid; and whether his *milieu* be romantic or actual, whether his personages be heroic or sordid, he goes about his task with the same assurance and intelligence. In his best work he takes rank with the world's novelists. He is a companion for Balzac and Richardson, an intimate for Fielding and Cervantes. His figures fall into their places beside the greatest of their kind. . . . In the world of man's creation his people are citizens to match the noblest; they are of the aristocracy of the imagination, the peers in their own right of the society of romance. And for all that, their state is mostly desolate and lonely and forlorn.

Henley, again, in the same month as he wrote the foregoing, gives us a generalised verdict on Meredith in his review of 'The Egoist' in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, November 3, 1879, where he says:

At its best, his work is of the first order; at its worst, it is brilliant, but tedious. One of the very few moderns who have the double gift of tragedy and comedy, he is one of the wittiest men of his generation and an original humorist to boot; he has a poet's imagination, and he is a quick observer; (he has studied human nature and human life and he is a master of his native tongue. But with all this he fails of acknowledged pre-eminence in his art. And the reason appears to be that he writes for himself alone. Extremely clever, he seems to prefer his cleverness to his genius. He is usually so bent on giving full play to his intellectual activity as to seem to ignore the novelist's main function, and to do his best to misuse the novelist's best gifts. He fatigues and bewilders where, if he so willed it, he could more easily attract and explain. You cannot see what he would do for the sparks he beats out in the doing. . . . It is no wonder that he should have been called 'a kind of Foppington-Fielding,' or that one should think of him as of a Molière who somehow prefers to be Marivaux. . . . Of course, it is a good thing to be the author of 'Rhoda Fleming,' and 'Beauchamp's Career,' of 'Richard Feverel' and 'Emilia,' for with all their faults those books are so many works of genius, and works of genius are not common. But it would have been a better thing so to have written them as to have made them intelligible to the world at large.



We have now examined a sufficient number of critical estimates to have gathered some general notion of where criticism would 'place' Meredith. While it may be thought at first glance that there is wide divergence of opinion—as when Oscar Wilde and Mr. Herbert Paul point out how he is in nowise a realist, whereas Mr. Le Gallienne is at pains to show how he is an example of the 'true realist'—there is really far more harmony than discord in these judgments of many minds.

We usually find the enthusiasm tempered, the admiration modified, by the recognition of certain grave faults which should not be present and cannot possibly inhere in the complete achievement of the highest. Henley and Mr. Brownell are the frankest in recognising these blemishes, and, despite the prejudiced opinion of the late York Powell, they are faults we do not find in George Eliot, who is in some ways Meredith's superior, though she falls behind him in the vivid creativeness of the imagination, and that splendid sense of power with which he confronts life as a whole.

It will be noted that his critics place him variously in the company of Balzac, Fielding, Scott, Browning, Dickens, and George Eliot—Mr. Chesterton alone drags in the feeble egoist Tolstoy—but this is seldom done with the idea that comparative criticism may be applied in his case, since most of them are agreed in the main that 'Meredith is Meredith.' It is rather an effort to express in a quick way some notion of his eminence in literature, not to suggest a likeness. He has done work which warrants the mention of his name with any of these, and he is, judged as a whole, utterly unlike each one of them. There is certainly no more likeness between him and Dickens than there is between Mont Blanc and the River Mississippi—both are great in different ways.

The resemblance to Browning—so much insisted upon, is no doubt more obvious, and yet at heart the two are strangers, for Browning is an essential Victorian and Meredith a 'modern,' in the sense so admirably explained above by 'E. S. G.'

His remoteness from his own age is due to his guiding star of comedy. He has written one of the finest tragic stories in the English language, and 'Rhoda Fleming' might well outlive most of his works, but comedy is the star to which he is ever true, and comedy was dead in the Victorian age, whereas it flourished in the Georgian, and has had re-birth in the twentieth century. Comedy can live only when men place themselves under the banner of Brain and determine to think rather than to feel, or at least to let their feelings be subject

to their reason. As Oscar Wilde very happily expresses it, Meredith's creations are not merely 'alive' in the sense that we feel Dickens's personages to be alive, sensuously that is to say, but 'they live in thought,' hence as a novelist he is 'interpretative and symbolic,' which is of the essence of comedy.

What is truly surprising in all these opinions we have examined is the lack of insistence on this aspect of Meredith. It is not enough to say that he is a great psychologist, that he is a philosophical novelist; he is the master mind of comedy using the modern novel as his vehicle instead of the stage. He has no fellowship with his younger contemporary, Mr. Thomas Hardy, who is a greater artist regarded purely from the point of view of the novel; that is to say, Mr. Hardy's novels are better, *quâ* novels, than Meredith's, but Meredith's are greater books, and only suffer by comparison when we test them by standards of conventions to which they were never intended to conform.

Whatever may be found lacking under microscopic criticism in Meredith's books, there is the continual sense of a fearless attitude to life, a great and noble spirit moving forward serenely to its destiny, amused the while with what it finds in humanity to interest itself. But whether this implies immortality for these books is a very different question. We may not be so unhopeful of Meredith's fate at the hands of posterity as Mr. Courtney is, and yet venture very seriously to doubt whether his fame will stereotype into a dusty convention such as Richardson's, or flourish, a fact of vigorous life, such as Fielding's or Smollett's or Sterne's is to the thinking book readers of our day. For Meredith with a following such as that of Scott or Thackeray or Dickens we simply cannot conceive.

What further strikes one in the opinions above quoted is the steady ignoring of Meredith the poet. Mr. Brownell flatly dismisses his poetry as a 'secondary affair,' and all the rest of the critics, without a word about it, seem to be of opinion that his place in literature will be fixed by his novels. Well, after all, it is somewhat idle to speculate, and posterity has a knack of thwarting the earlier generation in its cherished wishes. Meredith the poet may outlive Meredith the novelist, and, again, he may not; and then, again, it does not matter! He is to us now, and to all who come after us with the perception necessary to enjoy a rare and great mind, an incomparable writer of fiction, concerning whom to all who understand it is enough to say, 'Meredith is Meredith.'

This may be added finally, that while Meredith does not typify an epoch, his name will at least remain for all time a landmark of English letters, but it will not mark the era in which his life was chiefly lived and all his work achieved, so much as that succeeding it. In brief, this 'last of the great Victorians' is more likely to be regarded in time to come as first of the prophets of 'Modernism.'

## XVI

### THE CONTINENTAL VIEW OF MEREDITH

THERE is not, of course, a critical estimate of Meredith generally established on the Continent, radically distinct from the general estimate of him in England and America. French critics have, on the whole, shown most interest in his work, and indeed some of the studies which have appeared in the Paris reviews exceed in length and thoroughness anything ever printed in England or America on the same subject. But whether he is more widely read in France than in Germany is not an easy question to answer. Up to 1904 there were certainly more translations of his works in French than in German, but in that year a collected edition of the novels was begun in Berlin and is still in progress: an undertaking which France has not yet faced. It has to be remembered, however, that a larger proportion of Germans than of French read English, and as copies of many of his books in the familiar Tauchnitz edition have been in circulation on the Continent since 1875, when 'Richard Feverel' first appeared in two volumes, we may assume among German readers an acquaintance with Meredith at least equal to that of French readers, apart from the purely critical class. Doubtless more Germans than French have read him or wrestled with him in his native tongue. We must not too readily conclude that translations of his works in a certain language imply on the part of those native to that language a greater knowledge of the English writer than is the case with others into whose tongue no translations have been made. I do not know, for instance, of a Dutch translation of any of Meredith's works, yet the following letter was printed in the *Nation*, February 22, 1908:

SIR,—Mr. G. M. Trevelyan in saying about Mr. Meredith, 'But the world that so honours him is the English world alone,' overlooks my country. Here, in Holland, Meredith is very well known and much admired, of course, not by the public in general—neither is he, I feel sure, in England—but there is a large circle here where his books are read and highly appreciated. And this is not only

so in later years; for at least twenty years Meredith has been a familiar figure for our cultured people.—Yours, etc.,

A DUTCHMAN.

Rotterdam, February 17, 1908.

This would be news to many people, but what weight the letter may carry one cannot guess. The educated class of the Dutch, however, is noted for its linguistic attainments, and probably in no foreign country is there proportionately more English literature read by people of an alien tongue. Certainly Mr. Trevelyan was somewhat short of the mark in the phrase quoted by 'A Dutchman.' For, even when he was penning it, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* was printing one of the finest appreciations of Meredith ever written. Nothing so good as M. Firmin Roz's article was drawn from any English critic by the eightieth birthday celebrations. M. Roz remarks in a footnote to his first paragraph that 'the fame of George Meredith, established even here from his earliest days in literary and artistic circles, did not begin to spread until 1879, after the appearance of the "Egoist." ' Clearly Meredith was long ago 'honoured' by French critics, but if his novels have never run as *feuilletons* in the dailies of the boulevards, like those of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mr. H. G. Wells, that need not cause us surprise. 'The Egoist' would probably have been rejected by the fiction editor of the *Daily Mail*.

Before I proceed to examine the French criticisms, it may be worth while to set down in a brief paragraph a note of the translations which have appeared. First of all, was the greatly abridged translation of 'Sandra Belloni' by M. E. D. Forgues, which appeared in the three numbers of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* for November 15, December 1 and 15, 1864, and was later republished in 1866 by Hachette as part of M. Forgues's volume of English adaptations. In the same review and again in three different issues—those of April 15, May 1 and 15, 1865—and likewise by the same translator, an abridgement of 'Feverel' was printed as 'L'Epreuve de Richard Feverel.' The French version of 'The Egoist,' by Maurice Strauss, published in 1904, is, I gather from M. Roz, extremely unsatisfactory, but a translation of 'Diana of the Crossways' was in hand at the time of his writing, from which he seemed to expect better things. The 'Essay on Comedy' had also been obtainable in French since 1898, when M. Henry D. Davray's excellent translation was published separately by the *Mercure de France*, which review also printed in its second February

and both March issues of 1908, a translation of 'The Story of Chloe' by Marguerite Yersin. It will be seen from this that the amount of Meredith obtainable in French is small and unrepresentative, but there was never English author more difficult to convey into a foreign tongue with any approach to likeness.

Apart from the authorised German version of the novels, begun in Berlin in 1904, the only other German translation of which I have note is that of 'Harry Richmond,' published at Minden in 1904, in which year a Bohemian version of 'Feverel' was issued at Prague. In 1873 there was an Italian translation of 'Feverel,' published in a popular series at Milan. This is the entire tale of Meredith in foreign tongues and its poverty is no occasion for wonder, when we remember that so many of his countrymen find him addressing them in a speech so unusual that it seems as difficult to them as another language than their own.

Passing from bibliography to criticism, we find that the earliest notice of Meredith outside his own country occurs in a most competent study of 'Le Roman Anglais Contemporain' by M. E. D. Forgues in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 15, 1867. Oddly enough the writers whom M. Forgues brings into juxtaposition, on account of their having followed the tracks of Byron and Shelley in the enchanted land of Italy, are Trollope, Mrs. Browning, Mr. Alfred Austin and Meredith. Mr. Austin has published a novel, now long forgotten, entitled 'Won by a Head'—it sounds more like Hawley Smart than the staid and heavy laureate of our day—in which all the characters are brought together in Florence, and by virtue of this he rubs shoulders with Meredith for the only time in criticism, so far as I know. It is 'Vittoria' that M. Forgues is concerned with, and that novel had a special interest to him and the readers of the review, as the sequel to the story M. Forgues had in part translated less than three years earlier. The French critic is evidently somewhat exhausted after his bout with 'Vittoria,' and his judgment of the work would hardly whet the appetite of the readers of the *Deux Mondes*, though he says nothing that has not been said many times since by English critics, when he writes to this effect:

It would be a hard task to describe in detail the happenings of a life in which the troubles of the artiste, the jealousies of behind the scenes, the rivalries in love-affairs, are complicated with ceaseless journeyings, intrigues, abductions, fightings, spyings, duels; all moving swiftly, huddled together, confused and obscure enough to

baffle the quickest understanding, the most sustained interest. Imagination and wit are excellent gifts, so long as one does not misuse them. That is the conclusion to which one is inevitably led by the reading of this crowded work; where each chapter is a 'curtain'; where breathing space is lacking, so to say; where intelligence is accustomed to longing and to waiting; where the characters perform in a mist and seem as if they had become breathless and exhausted in their dizzying careers. Let us add, lest we be accused of injustice, that here and there is a glade, a vista if you prefer it, on the front of whose flowery confusion we catch a glimpse of the trail of the lion, sure signs of a power which, had it been but constant, would have become masterly.

Many years passed, so far as I can discover, before the name of Meredith engaged the readers of any French review again as a subject of criticism—thirty years almost! This one short note of M. Forgues was all that French criticism had to say for well nigh three decades, if we are to believe the most diligent of bibliographers; and yet the literary and artistic circles of Paris were familiar with Meredith 'from the earliest days' of his career! But when the French critics did engage themselves with the English novelist, it was to some purpose. Nothing could be more charming, for instance, than the way in which the late Marcel Schwob, who visited the novelist at Box Hill, presented Meredith to the French public in his rare and masterly 'Spicilège,' from which I have quoted at some length in an earlier chapter. He does not bear out M. Roz, when he begins by explaining the difficulty of his task at a time—1896—when Tolstoy and Ibsen were the vogue in Paris and thus easy to discuss, whereas of Meredith's works 'one knows nothing at all here.' He adds, perhaps excusingly, and none too correctly, that seven years earlier England was as ignorant of the novels. The reasons he gives for the long neglect are, of course, commonplaces of our criticism: the packed and over-weighted sentences, staggering with their loads of meaning, the involved psychology of the characters, implying too arduous a task from readers accustomed to the simpler emotions touched in the novels of Dickens and George Eliot.

M. Schwob then goes on to discuss how Meredith ever came to be accepted of the public, and gives the credit chiefly to Swinburne, Henley and Stevenson, for their 'repeated articles' in his praise. This, of course, applies only to Henley, of whom M. Roz has truly said that he 'contributed more than any one, not only to his success, but still more to the evolution of public opinion with regard to

Meredith.' But the power that was greater than Henley and all the friendly critics to make for ultimate success is thus described by M. Schwob :

Summing up, we may say that because of the importance of the questions which Meredith raises in his works, by the impassioned strength of his heroes—than whom the seventeenth century poets have produced no finer figures—by the haunting spell cast over us by his women : Rose Jocelyn, Lucy Desborough, Clara Middleton, 'Sweet creatures, with sweet names, the girls of George Meredith,' as Stevenson says of them; and above all because his genius, so far from diminishing in strength, has never ceased to grow during the space of more than thirty years, in which time he has produced about twelve long novels and four volumes of poetry, he must prevail in the end.

As the train was bearing M. Schwob toward Dorking, he began to think of a phrase which might sum up Meredith and his works, and he found it in 'More brain, O Lord, more brain!' The need of woman to rise to the height of her possible intellectual power and so, on equal terms, to understand man her mate, and man's need to understand nature, seemed to be the lesson of the sage he was about to meet, as it shaped itself vaguely in the Frenchman's mind while on his way to Box Hill. But perhaps the greatest compliment M. Schwob pays to Meredith is not to be found in this critical Kit-Kat, but in his dialogue on 'L'Amour' in which he names one of the characters 'Sir Willoughby.'

It was Mme. Alphonse Daudet who reintroduced the name of Meredith into French periodical criticism by giving a racy sketch of her two meetings with him at Box Hill and in London in the spring of 1895, in her 'Notes on London,' contributed to the *Revue de Paris* of January 1, 1896. In the chapter on 'Home Life' we have already read Madame Daudet's vivacious description of the novelist at home and in society. From the point of view of criticism her notes are of less importance, for no doubt the late Hannah Lynch was within the mark in supposing that Madame Daudet had never read 'The Egoist' or 'Diana' and never puzzled over a line of 'Modern Love.' Her effort at criticism is to this effect :

When we French knew nothing of him beyond his hymn to France in 1870 ('France, December 1870'), the generosity of that page, offered on the morrow of the disasters, should have aroused our admiration of him; but all his work is full of human observation expressed in the highest manner; his poems, his novels: 'The



Egoist,' 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' 'The Tragic Comedians.' I have heard him compared to our Mallarmé for his artistic inspiration, the originality and independence of his mind.

Quite obviously the charming wife of Daudet is here writing of what she does not fully understand. She had not read Meredith at all, I fancy, and spoke at second-hand. Miss Lynch, who from her long residence in Paris might almost be described as a Continental writer, took Madame Daudet to task in the *Bookman*, in this style :

She informs her French readers that he is the Mallarmé of England. Could ignorance run to more absurd length? If you must hunt for Mr. Meredith's brother on French soil, he is there under your eyes as Stendhal. The same ruggedness and obscurity of style and meaning; the same bewildering originality; the same daring conception and delineation of woman; the same wit and brilliance of epigram and dialogue; the same large interpretation of life, of motive, of character. The defects, too, run parallel in their separate tongues: excessive subtlety, an affectation of utterance never surprised into simplicity and directness; an abhorrence of the conventional and commonplace ever on active guard, a tendency to abuse comedy and reduce the life of fashion to a fine art eliminated of all nature and passion and common experiences.

Of course Madame Daudet only observed that she had heard Meredith compared to Mallarmé, and when we find a critic such as M. Firmin Roz discovering even a momentary suggestion of likeness between Meredith and Mallarmé, Madame Daudet's ignorance may not be so atrocious! As to Stendhal, is it not just possible that Miss Lynch found in him the French Meredith not because of any extraordinary fellowship in art, but because of a literary career that somewhat resembled Meredith's? These literary likenesses are most unsatisfactory aids to criticism. Madame Daudet's notes on Meredith have no critical value, yet they indicate that early in the nineties, if not before, Meredith was a celebrity to literary France. Naturally when in 1900, M. Charles Legras, a French *littérateur* who has made a special study of English letters, and was for two years on the staff of the *Westminster Gazette* in London, came to write his admirable series 'Chez nos Contemporains d'Angleterre' for the *Journal des Débats*, he began with George Meredith. M. Legras writes with a nice appreciation of every aspect of the master's work and the poise of a true critic. Even when his criticism tends to run on conventional lines it remains interesting as the



*From the drawing by Hablot K. Brown ('Phiz')  
in 'Once a Week.'*

#### THE THREE MAIDENS.

Said they to the youngest 'Why walk you there so still ?  
The land is dark, the night is late :'  
'O, but the heart in my side is ill,  
And the nightingale will languish for its mate.'  
— *George Meredith.*



judgment of a foreign student who does not write at second-hand, but out of wide and deep knowledge of English literature :

It is suggestive of the French influence under which Mr. Meredith has worked that of all his characters he prefers Renée de Croisnel, one of the heroines of 'Beauchamp's Career.' 'If a Frenchman were to propose to her; tell me that he loved her,' he said to me laughing, 'I should immediately challenge him.' Here was a challenge which had a risk of being taken up.

M. Legras then goes on to mention Meredith's works in the order in which they appeared, saying that it was 'The Egoist' which in 1879 established his identity as distinct from that of 'Owen Meredith.' He touches upon the characteristics of the different books and considers 'Rhoda Fleming' the most dramatic, believing that it could be easily transferred to the stage. The types of character he finds essentially alive, but he observes that the author often requires an inordinate number of pages wherein to build up for us the creatures of his brain :

In order to show us his heroes mounting a horse or taking part in a quadrille, or even supping their soup and saying, 'How are you this morning?' we have to finish, whether we wish it or no, by living their life. When we add that at least fifteen days are necessary to a conscientious reading of 'The Egoist,' how shall we be able not to preserve in our mind the character of Sir Willoughby Patterne? Certainly there are too many of these figures whom we remember in common with their comrades as possessing no striking originality and with whom we have been forced to spend much time.

Unfortunately after having praised the subjects of these romances, recognised the fidelity of the types, we shall find a style very unequal and a composition that is lamentable. At times we shall be dazzled by the admirable pictures of nature, as in the chapter of 'Richard Feverel' entitled 'A Diversion on a Penny Whistle.' . . . But alongside of these excellences how deep is the fall into affectation and obscurity! In the later works especially, the excess of finish has banished all simplicity: nearly every word is made to carry a metaphor, the images impinge upon each other and the grammar abounds in idioms.

M. Legras then undertakes a minute analysis of 'The Egoist,' remarking that the work is at once human in its passions and general sentiments, and essentially English in its setting, its manners, the society it describes :

Unfortunately the construction of the book is a challenge to our

good sense. Mr. Meredith does not understand the narrative art. As a rule he writes five pages when one would be sufficient. . . . In France there is an inclination to believe that this long-windedness and obscurity are common to the Anglo-Saxon genius; but this is somewhat of an error. Without doubt the novel among our English neighbours does not possess that brevity due to the judicious choice of details which is the glory of the great French romances: but we shall find a great difference of procedure between 'The Egoist' and 'Old Mortality' of Sir Walter Scott, 'The Woodlanders' of Thomas Hardy, 'The Jungle Book' of Rudyard Kipling. As regards the tendency to obscurity, there is one unfailing touchstone wherewith it may be tested: the theatre. A book that is obscure but may have other excellent qualities will possibly find many 'superior persons' ready to make it their gospel, but transport it to the stage and you will speedily learn whether it is in harmony with public taste. Mr. Meredith has once made this attempt, I believe, without, however, avowing his work, and the piece did not live. On the other hand, at the time of writing the three hundredth representation is taking place of 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray,' a play that is clear and skilfully constructed.

To a Frenchman brought up in the faith of *une pièce bien faite* this opinion was inevitable. M. Legras's reference to Meredith's unavowed play I have been unable to confirm, and think it improbable.

To me (he continues) the wit of Mr. Meredith is as strange as his humour. Thus, in 'The Egoist' we are presented with much pomp to a certain Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, who possesses a wit so penetrating, so trenchant, so dazzling, 'that she could have ruled the county with an iron rod of caricature.' We see at once that she is going to pass on to young Willoughby one of these *mots* which stuck like an arrow between the shoulders of a man, and we find ourselves waiting for a remark such as that which she passed upon a certain prince of the best blood, 'A foot, a soul of a young lady;' or, if one wishes something more like caricature, one may recall the mordant epigram of Albert Millaud on Sarah Bernhardt when she was notably slim of figure: 'When she goes into her bath the water lowers.' Mrs. Mountstuart saw Sir Willoughby at a moment when the hero was engaging in a dance, the great lady opens her mouth, everybody pauses to receive her word, she speaks: 'You see, he has a leg!' Whereupon Mr. Meredith spreads himself out in twenty pages of admiration: he has sundry observations on the heart of Charles Stuart, on Buckingham and Rochester—I am left confounded.

To-day Mr. Meredith's work is finished, or at least he is likely to add but little to his great performance: one can therefore attempt

to pass upon him a more complete judgment than on any of his contemporaries. To sum him up in a simile: he resembles the Victory of Samothrace, that statue without a head, without feet, and in every sense incomplete, but of such magnificent parts that it seems to tower above the greatest.

I have deemed it wise to devote especial attention to M. Legras's study for its intrinsic value as well as for its being the first fully-considered criticism of Meredith printed in French. It dates back a mere matter of nine years, but since then the name of Meredith has been much in evidence in the French reviews, and his work is engaging the French critics so earnestly that it cannot be long before some effort is made across the Channel worthily to present the best of his writings in the most literary language of Europe. But even more significant than occasional set studies of the master are the incidental references one discovers from time to time in the writings of French critics indicating an intimacy with the works of Meredith. In the brilliant sketch of 'Foules Anglaises' which M. André Chevrillon wrote in the *Revue de Paris*, December 1, 1902, there is, for example, a passing touch on Meredith which leaves us in no doubt as to M. Chevrillon's being one of the many French authors who have come under the influence of the great Englishman. He writes:

It was not until about 1880 that the English, who had always looked upon us as eager pleasure-seekers, frivolous merry-makers, followers of La Fontaine and Béranger, learnt to speak about 'French pessimism.' We, on the other hand, have come to speak of English optimism. The greatest of the writers who have helped to mould the mind of the people since 1870, such as Robert Browning, Ruskin, George Meredith, have preached and sung in praise of the willingness to live, the hope it breathes in the heart, the beauty with which it engages the eye, and how through all the trials of life it is a sustaining power and a source of beauty.

Ruskin, the æsthetic, has said that the most beautiful of all colours is the carnation-flush of human cheeks, and George Meredith, who has no peer for insight among the English novelists, the child of Shakespeare, a profound poet, a rare and delicately-adjusted philosopher, has flushed the cheeks of his heroines with that living carnation: they are healthy young girls, from the bosom of Nature. These maidens charm by their refined and unerring power, their courage, their sure instincts, divinations swift as the flight of birds, by the unconscious growth, apart from the deep questions of sex, of their emotions, in which we discern their dawning ideas—by the blossoming forth, in short, of all the united forces of their beings in the splendid flowering of their love.

He has full faith in Nature. In her he recognises the source of all wisdom and beauty; he considers her worthy of our love which, so far from being satisfied with the flight of the low-circling swallow, yields itself to the magic of an ascent that ceases not, even in the heavens. He is in love with our wonderful life, its changings and upliftings, its beauty when unspoiled, its unconscious or meaningful unfoldings of leaf and tender shoot, little by little, until the human plant, in all its ripe perfection, is revealed. Then, penetrating psychologist that he is, he takes in at a glance from crest to root, with its spiritual flower, the continuous play of its slightest shades of mind, its scintillations of thought, its ephemeral fragrances, maintained by the most subtle and mysterious distillation of the unseen essences which it receives from the dull earth. He knows that even the best of us living on this earth, unknown to ourselves, have still to spiritualise ourselves at the fire of our willingness.

Mr. Meredith, who never preaches, and whose following grows stronger day by day, is at heart a moralist, and the one to warn us most often and most hard to please. We might call him the apostle of an idealistic naturalism. Like Browning and Ruskin, he believes that the soul will rise to more and more lofty heights from the splendours disclosed to the world. He sees what is divine in that which is earthly; and believes that we can help this divinity to free itself from our nature if our life is pure and wholesome, our character firm and true.

'The Egoist' is, of course, the work which has most exercised the minds of Continental critics, and if any one book were to be chosen as significant of what Meredith has had to tell the thinkers across the Channel it would be this. To the Continent he is the author of 'The Egoist.' The most elaborate and painstaking study of the work which exists is that of M. Emile Légouis, published in the *Revue Germanique* of July-August 1905. No English writer has ever attempted so exhaustive an examination of any modern masterpiece. The learning and the specialised knowledge of English life and history which M. Légouis has contrived to weave into this paper are remarkable. For thoroughness his method is more German than French, but the spirit of the whole is eminently French. It is a piece of serious criticism that does infinite honour to its subject, in its earnestness and sincerity, and equally to French contemporary letters. M. Légouis read his paper in the first instance before the Société des Amis de l'Université de Paris in January, 1905, and he did not feel inclined to apologise for the tardiness of France in taking up the study of Meredith in view of his own countrymen having so long neglected him. He sketched

the early life of the novelist, his travels on the Continent, and outlined something of his work in general before turning to the particular subject of his discourse. The novels he described as those of a man who had seen other peoples closely and deeply and, while full of the very pith of patriotism, had managed to look at his own country and his own people with the eyes of an outsider. He had come as a teacher at a time when England stood in need of such as he—the middle of the nineteenth century—when England was all ears to the doctrine of autophagy, or self-resource, which had been preached to her by Carlyle. That had been a doctrine of insularism, exclusiveness. Carlyle had adjured his countrymen to assert themselves, to be Germanic, to be Teutonic, to be Anglo-Saxon! But to be Anglo-Saxon, says M. Légouis, is to be doubly English; while this was certainly not all the counsel of Carlyle, it was at least the part of it most readily apprehended and observed. There were those who asked themselves what was the use of endeavouring to correct the insular haughtiness of the people, their disdain of the foreigner and their contempt for the finer issues of life doubly-dying their indigenous characteristics. Such remembered the culture of the south and what it had done and could still do to advance and clarify a national taste in the finer things of life. There was Matthew Arnold and his famous campaign against Philistinism, his holding up of Greece and France as examples, for the refining of the national character, against Carlyle's Anglo-Saxonism.

It was the time of increase in the followers of the æsthetic doctrine of Ruskin (says M. Légouis), whose aim was to cultivate the taste for the beautiful, whereas Carlyle had preached activity only; the pre-Raphaelites had withdrawn themselves from their own proper age, to look back across the years that had passed, seeking distractedly for delights of other days, deeming the people among whom they moved to be harsh and unsympathetic. It was the time that raised Swinburne, the *enfant terrible* of the group, to encourage the search after pleasure, Victor Hugo to show his pity for the poor, and raised to their highest the great Englishmen who had been Italianised by the Renaissance. It was, moreover, the period in which George Eliot gave a new depth to the ordinary novel, strengthened and enlivened moral philosophy by expending upon it a wider knowledge, and, without any of the narrowness of her countrymen, fixed her clear-sighted and kindly glance upon those who lived in other lands.

To this group of writers, informed with a wider or more refined



culture, Meredith is allied. One of the first things to strike one when perusing his novels after those of his predecessors, is the sharpened intellect, the absence of haughtiness and prejudice; he has the deep interest in all minds and peoples which is common to psychologists. He is diligent in learning to understand them, or rather—for his analyses have not the appearance of being laboured—he has insight into the mode of life, action, and thought of each race; again, he seeks to offer to his fellow-countrymen, not in the guise of strangers, as a feast of raillery, but as food for their intelligence, objects on which they may lavish their affections, too often spent entirely on themselves, a greater variety, reality and wider outlook on life. Anything that seems to him to betray a British limitation rouses him to vigorous rebellion. It makes him feel angry and ashamed to see his country detracted from or made foolish by means of conceit or stupidity. So he goes on railing at what he calls the 'singular attraction amongst English people for thick-headedness,' directing their taste towards the arts, all the arts, for which he himself has a consuming passion. His countrymen may have humour, but he wishes them also to have intelligence.

This is all extremely well considered and shows a just appreciation of the *rôle* which Meredith was designed for as one of the great teachers of the English people; but in 'The Egoist' particularly his lesson is as much for Europe and all mankind as it is for his countrymen. Of all his books none is so elemental, so universal, in its appeal; hence M. Légouis could not have any hesitation in choosing it for his exposition of the real Meredith. After a minute and searching analysis of the work from every point of view, the French critic formulates the following opinions as to its philosophy:

It were truly superfluous to tack a moral on to this study. One, or rather two morals stand out quite clearly, I think; one in respect to women, the other for men.

Meredith reminds men that since the far-off times when they lived in woods and caves, they have altered only in the garbing of their primitive nature. The egoist of to-day is the primitive man. His egoism has only become more cultured without disappearing; it has abated nothing of its first primal strength. And he warns us that if we once retard our forward movement by one step we immediately fall back to our very starting-point. It is with us as with the rower against the stream: relax our effort and we drift back—to our common origin with seed and plant.

To women, Meredith expresses his desire that they should have 'more brain,' for he scarcely need say that the best among them to-day are those who yet sacrifice themselves to the egoist as his natural prey. He does not consider (this is another of his bold

sayings) that clear-sightedness is unable to exist in harmony with true love. He sympathises with that feminist crusade which had already in 1879 passed its first infancy but had not yet attained the hardy growth we now observe in it. But on this subject he maintains a delicacy and caution which it is meet that we should consider. He who, among all the English novelists, has best known how to express in the most impassioned words, in the most glowing scenes, the emotions of love, young love that brightens and inflames, has not, even in that comedy of his, sacrificed love to the exigencies of his satirical mood, nor to the limits of a system. From the strength of true love his heroine Clara, the youthful rebel, borrows her power of resisting the advances of a false love. To the man who loves her in a true and noble manner she surrenders herself with the self-denial and renunciation that were—and doubtless will always be—the necessary signs by which she understands that she genuinely loves. Unbendable before Willoughby, before Vernon she is bendable, yielding, shy, abrupt and submissive. Vernon has for her that admiration which watches carefully and takes note.

What, then, according to Meredith, are the signs of the passion of love which he regards as genuine? First of all, a kind of humility common to the two lovers—the enraptured reflection of each in respect to the nature of the other, delight in seeing that nature unfold itself freely, fear of touching it lest it should be shaken or lessened, the feeling that one's own nature is of small account and that the nobler one is that which one contemplates. The true lover is he who loves the very soul of his adored one, who loves it in her and for her sake, who loves it distinct and sometimes wholly apart from her, as if by that means he could see her more perfectly as she is, and who delights in her variety.

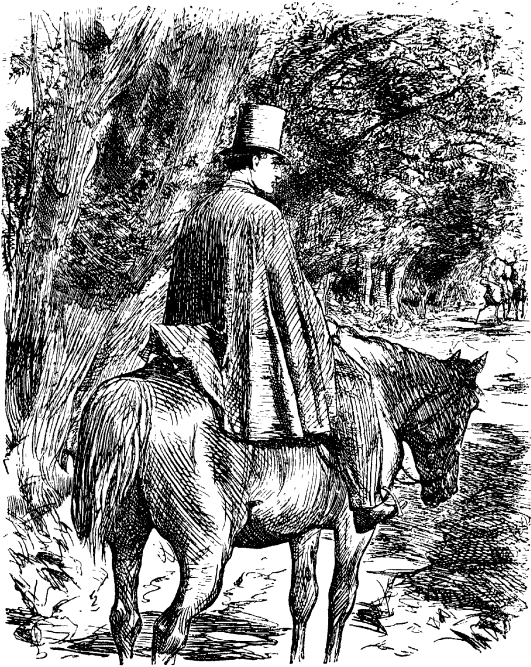
It is fortunate that the background of the novel is lighted and warmed by the flame of genuine love, for the comedy which is acted in the front of the stage is sternly unmerciful, often with an undercurrent of pain in its laughter. The sharp instrument of the satirist pierces so fearlessly, so deeply that one wonders repeatedly if, in removing the diseased tissues, it does not affect the essential organs. It is a matter of doubt if there can be a name in any language which indicates a measurement slight enough to mark out the imperceptible distance which divides egoism from vitality. Does not a shiver run through one ceaselessly at the thought that the analyst is playing in his ironic fashion with the most intimate being of mankind: at the thought that the vice he so sternly condemns may be destroyed only by destroying life itself; for if it means life itself, it is curable only by death?

You have seen a spade dig deep into the earth around a sickly-looking stem at whose root the practised eye of the gardener has suspected there lives a never-dying worm. At each spade thrust one fears for the root as the iron comes so close to it. The smallest

space, a fraction of an inch or so, and the tree is doomed. If the spade be handled by a La Rochefoucauld, we may be confident that the worm will not escape, but we may well tremble for the plant. The wonderful part of Meredith's philosophy and art is the fact that he knows so well, without cutting in any way the root, how to remove the hateful and formidable larva which has become encrusted there until it seems impossible to do anything without reckoning with it.

'La Femme dans L'Œuvre de Meredith' was the title of a remarkably well-informed article, also in the *Revue Germanique* (March-April 1906), from the pen of Mlle. Henriette Cordelet. This lady displays an extraordinary knowledge of women in English literature, from Shakespeare to Thomas Hardy, and her study ranks with the best criticism of Meredith, but it is an aspect of the novelist on which there is really nothing new to say; and in our chapter on 'His Heroines and Womenfolk' most that need be said has already found expression, so there is no call here to do more than mention the article of Mlle. Cordelet, who compares Meredith in 'The Egoist' to Molière in 'L'Ecole des Femmes.'

To the fine appreciation of Meredith with which M. Firmin Roz signalised the eightieth birthday celebration, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, of February, 1908, it would be difficult to devote undue attention; as a scholarly exposition of a foreign writer it ranks with M. Légouis's really great criticism of 'The Egoist,' showing every sign of a rich and scholarly mind and that splendid poise of judgment which seems native in all French men of letters, making of them the ideal critics. But M. Roz's essay occupies thirty-five pages of the *Deux Mondes*, which means that I can do no more than touch it in brief and sketchy outline. He begins by stating that no novelist is more open to misjudgment by reason of the very qualities which, once duly appreciated, are inherent in his greatness, and that a first essential to understanding Meredith is to forget all one has ever been accustomed to look for in fiction. He then goes on to contrast the non-conformity of English literature with the conformity of the French, and to point out that both have their virtues, though he naturally leans to that national taste and temper which go to the making of a consistent and equable literature. But Meredith is an arch-heretic, for he does not even conform to the commonest requirements of the medium he has chosen for his expression. Hence comparative criticism is useless as applied to him—though M. Roz is made to think of Mallarmé when he reads the prelude to 'The Egoist' and later does attempt comparisons.



*By permission of Messrs. Bradbury,  
Agnew & Co.]*

*[From the drawing by Charles Keene  
in 'Once a Week.']*

#### EVAN'S ENCOUNTER WITH LAXLEY AND HENRY.

Presently his horse's ears pricked, and the animal gave a low neigh. Evan's eyes fixed harder on the length of gravel leading to the house. There was no sign, no figure. Out from the smooth grass of the lane a couple of horsemen issued, and came straight to the gates.

—*Evan Harrington.* Chapter XLV.



There is arduous work before any one who essays to follow Meredith through the tangles and torrents of his stories! The individualism of our country, so strongly marked in the marriage relationship, so established in the home—an institution which M. Roz deems needful of explanation to French readers—and so characteristic of the national spirit, is *in excelsis* in Meredith. It is here the critic strikes the note that keys his whole study. As to the English devotion to 'character,' which finds expression in Meredith, he remarks:

There is a kind of wisdom which is above common sense and natural instincts: it is the quick perception of a strong, calm mind, the steadfastness of an upright will; it is 'character.' Mr. Meredith's noblest heroes, his favourite heroes, those who give to his books their most lasting impressions, as they would in real life, are strong characters: Merthyr Powys, Vernon Whitford, Redworth. We cannot help comparing them with those who have the whole-hearted sympathy of Thomas Hardy: Gabriel Oak, Winter-born, Diggory Venn. Tried in friendship, faithful in love, calm in their attitude towards life, they are strong and healthy specimens of Englishmen, active in body and mind, 'the typical Saxon,' as Diana calls one of them. Mr. Thomas Hardy has taken his models from the lowly country folk, Mr. Meredith from society people. The former are blunt, the latter more subtle; but the fundamental element is the same, and the refinement of sentiment belongs no less to the one group than to the other. This is because they are both brave enough to face life openly and to consider it in other ways than as merely ministering to their wishes, pleasures and whims. They see life as it really is; understand it and accept it. They are neither egoists nor creatures of passion. Their disinterestedness leads them to love; true love which gives up and forgets its own aspirations, surrenders everything, expects nothing, and triumphs in the end. Vernon marries Clara, Redworth weds Diana, and we have a presentiment and an earnest hope that some day Sandra will become the wife of Merthyr Powys.

In short, the whole 'philosophy' of life which we can gather from Mr. Meredith's novels is an essentially English vindication of character, prolonged and thoroughly examined. The heroes such as Merthyr, Redworth and Vernon are such as are in fullest accord with the facts of life, and that is why in the end they come out nobly from the great trial, 'ordeal,' in which Richard Feverel shows himself a failure.

In further consideration of Meredith's philosophy, M. Roz takes Mr. Trevelyan's phrase 'the prophet of sanity' for his text and approvingly expounds it thus:



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He has brought to men some old truths shaped in a rejuvenated gospel that makes them seem to be but newly conceived. And in fact they are new, since they face the light in a new age, and one were at a loss how to distinguish them, except by the most artificial of abstractions, from the radiant intelligence which, in truth, does not merely accompany them, but inheres in them, and impresses them upon us. It is only by means of that illumination that we see clearly for the first time the things which have always been before our eyes without attracting our attention; it is by means of it that we at last understand, that we know. . . . So we must not rely upon finding very original ideas in Mr. Meredith's works: nor, indeed, is that the function of a novelist. Let us watch the movements of his characters, let us listen to their discourse. Behind the outward show on which we too often glance in a careless, indifferent and wearied fashion, there lurks an unknown meaning which will suddenly appear when the artist's hand draws aside the curtain. Genius does not invent: it simply points its finger at the very heart of things, and makes us tremble before the truths unveiled. Not that the truths are new, but that our comprehension of them is; it is on the mind of the beholder that they exert their influence, and in his mind are they created.

Mr. Meredith's novels seem to conjure up in our minds a vision of the world as it really exists, of life regarded as a concrete fact, with its necessary elements, and its true basis, of man and woman regarded in their proper relationship, in their real nature. All this, of course, not theoretically, arbitrarily, but seen by the simple light of observation, the results of experience, by the mere reflections of a courageous sincerity. Life is not regarded as an interesting system, but on the contrary it first of all impresses truths on the mind gathered by observation and these in turn react upon it, lighting up its secret recesses. Every exaggeration confutes itself by the disappointment which it involves, by the contradictions to which it gives rise, by its attendant consequences. To the man who looks upon life simply, frankly, there is no immoderation which does not reveal itself as such in the facts. The upright life stands between two opposing extremes. 'Our civilisation is founded in common sense. It is the first condition of sanity to believe it.'

Into the detail of M. Roz's most searching, but always appreciative criticism, one cannot here attempt to go, but this note as to the 'battle of the sexes,' of which Mlle. Cordelet has written so well in her study above mentioned, may be quoted:

The 'circumstances' of Mr. Meredith's novels are nearly always the same. When he makes his characters face great questions in 'Beauchamp's Career,' it is the radicalism of the English people; in 'The Tragic Comedians,' it is socialism; in 'Vittoria,' the

revolutionary spirit; in 'Diana of the Crossways,' the social independence of women—he always and everywhere shows that they involve the battle of the sexes, in which prudence and happiness are the stakes. Man, indeed, never exposes himself more openly than in his opinions and attitude towards women. Take Willoughby as an example: his egoism never expands wholly, never unrolls all its folds and shows all its secrets until it is undergoing the test of love. Love is the great test of Richard Feverel. 'Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man,' he writes in 'The Egoist,' 'or they shoot us higher than the topmost star. But it is as we please. Let them tell us what we are to them: for us they are our back and front of life: the poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice; ours is the choice . . . they are to us what we hold of best or worst within.'

As we choose: we are the artificers of their fate, so we are answerable for their degradation or their ennobling. Mr. Meredith wars on behalf of woman, but not for mere feminism. Although he may believe she ought to have her own rights, a mind, a soul, he is as far as possible from believing it would be an ideal thing for her to have the independence of isolated individuality. In his eyes, the fullest life exists only in union, in love. Woman brings into love that spontaneity which is seen in the poet, that beauty which compels us to cherish her as the purest mirror of beauty of the world, that spirituality which her less material and more subtle nature is able to maintain, so long as she is not turned aside from her natural destiny. Diana Warwick, Sandra Belloni, Clara Middleton, that is what you bring to those who are worthy of you, to those whom the test has shown to be the strongest and best, truly manly, in a word, men of character. These are they to whom is given the victory, and they alone are capable of achieving happiness since they alone live in the full sense of life.

Finally we have in the following M. Roz's own summing up of the great writer whose personality has within recent years awakened among the intellectuals of France an interest so deep and sincere that in the near future the influence of Meredith on French writers of the new generation cannot fail to be considerable:

He affects brevity when his wish is to gather himself together for a forward leap; a brevity that sharpens and betimes blunts the reader's perception; a briskness that engages us without affording any peace, and an energy that knows no repose. These qualities are all most effective in novels whose aim is not to amuse lazy minds nor to pamper idle fancies, but to rouse intelligent understandings and imprint upon them a clear and lasting impression of human life, its tragedies and comedies, its need of sympathy and its provocation to laughter. Gifted with so wide a sense of reality,

equally capable of either irony or pathos, Mr. Meredith raises *sa figure d'aisée et superbe prépondérance* above all living English novelists. But in spite of all his disconcerting qualities, he does not exist among them in isolation. The tradition of the English novel is so strong that even the most independent or rebellious novelist never quite escapes it, and it would be interesting to follow its influence upon George Meredith. . . . He is not without qualities analogous with those of his great contemporaries; he is like Dickens in his wealth of detail, his humour and his feeling for caricature; like Thackeray in the delicacy and subtlety of his portrayal of womenkind, and in his irony; like George Eliot in the seriousness of the questions which he propounds and his deep knowledge of life. . . . There is no question as to the difficulty of his novels: they must be studied rather than read. But what a rich reward does the diligent reader reap from the subtle artist and close observer of life! What a lesson we should derive from him, we whose novels, if they have none of the blemishes which are the exact reverse of Mr. Meredith's good qualities, have too often a need of the good qualities which are the reverse of his blemishes! Let the mind but cleave its way through these thickets and accustom itself to the variations of light and shade in these enchanted woods: it will soon yield to their enchantment. Thus it is that we admire Meredith, and when we consider that he is also—some say, above all—a poet, and the author of 'Modern Love,' we would say that, even though his novels in their essentially human and English characteristics are too bedecked with personal fripperies to be universally recognised and loved as real masterpieces, they are yet very great novels, whose author discloses himself as a personality of the most remarkable kind; unquestionably the greatest man of letters in England at the present time, even in the eyes of those who hesitate or who refuse to own that he is England's greatest novelist.

In the *Mercure de France* of March 1, 1908, M. Henri D. Davray, who had already written so discerningly of Meredith's poetry in *Literature*, the short-lived weekly review issued by the *Times*, devoted his always scholarly article on 'Lettres Anglaises' to a review of Meredith's life and work, while a month later, in another Continental review, M. Stanislas Rzeuski published a long appreciation, declaring that 'Meredith is undoubtedly the most universally esteemed representative of English contemporary literature.' And shortly after the death of the novelist, M. L. Simons, the director of the Dutch Universal Library, Amsterdam, wrote an interesting letter to the *Westminster Gazette*, in which he stated that he had first been attracted to Meredith on the publication of 'The Amazing Marriage,' a reading of which induced him at once to secure a complete set of the

author's works. He ended by reading all, and most of them twice. He then wrote a study of Meredith for the benefit of his fellow countrymen. 'It took me,' he says, 'with my other work, little less than eighteen months to do this; but I have no recollection of my having spent another eighteen months in my life so full of intellectual, imaginative and literary enjoyment.'

From these somewhat sketchy notes, in which I have observed sequence of date rather than relativeness of criticism, it will be seen that in France at least there is a very intelligent and steadily widening appreciation of Meredith's art and philosophy. No such evidence of critical interest has come under my notice from Germany; but I am less familiar with German criticism and may have missed what others are acquainted with; though I do not think anything approaching in extent or importance to the French criticism I have quoted has yet appeared in Germany. [I have since been told that to the *Deutsche Rundschau*, in 1904-5, Dr. Sotteck contributed a fine appreciation of the novelist.] The German edition<sup>1</sup> of the novels is, however, something that France has to emulate; but I am persuaded that Meredith will never have finer interpreters than M. Légouis, Mlle. Cordelet, M. Roz, M. Davray, or indeed any of the French writers to whom in the foregoing pages I have had to draw attention. Certainly Mr. Trevelyan was less than just to France—whatever he may have been to Holland!—when he declared that it was the English world alone that honoured Meredith.

It should be noted that at the time when the first edition of the present work was in the press many articles appeared in the Continental journals and reviews—so many, indeed, that a survey of them would take this chapter beyond all bounds—called forth by the passing of the great poet-novelist. Of these none excelled in interest or beauty the tributes of M. Henri Davray in the *Mercur de France* and in the *Figaro*. But the 'Continental view' is, after all, the home view, for none of the foreign critics we have read differs vitally from English criticism, though they have all some fresh touch that adds to the completeness of our view of a great Englishman whose reputation has become European.

<sup>1</sup> A German friend informs me that Miss Ida L. Benecke's translation of 'The Tragic Comedians,' published soon after Meredith's death, is admirably done. Miss Benecke, I understand, actually made her translation of the novel no less than twenty-seven years before the author's death.

## XVII

### ILLUSTRATORS OF THE POEMS AND NOVELS

To all but collectors and connoisseurs it may be something of a surprise to know that the illustrators of Meredith are worthy of notice. Yet the illustrations of his poems and his novels, if collected, would make a large and interesting portfolio. The most important of them are also the least familiar; they take us back to that golden age of English wood-engraving in the early 'sixties,' when Millais, Holman Hunt, Sandys, Tenniel, Keene, and 'Phiz' were drawing their little pencil pictures for *Once a Week*, and the books of the period, now eagerly and wisely sought after by collectors. In the present work some of the most noteworthy of these engravings have been carefully reproduced, but the subject as a whole is of sufficient bibliographic importance to warrant more than can be conveyed in the 'legends' of the cuts.

There are several remarkable facts associated with the *débuts* of Meredith and his long survival. It was noted, for instance, that Mr. W. M. Rossetti, who reviewed 'Poems' of 1851 on the first appearance of the volume, was alive to congratulate the author, fifty-seven years later, on the attainment of his eightieth birthday, and now survives him. It may also be mentioned as an interesting fact that the first artist to illustrate anything written by Meredith was Sir John Tenniel, who made the admirable drawing of Sir Gawain and his bride that accompanied 'The Song of Courtesy,' the first contribution from the poet to *Once a Week*, dated July 9, 1859. Almost half a century later, Sir John was alive to sign the address presented to Meredith on February 12, 1908, though, oddly enough, his name was not among the signatures. This was Tenniel's only illustration to Meredith's words, and it is thoroughly characteristic of the artist's manner, which in his earlier career, as in his prime, was marked by a free line and a supple grace of figure that in later years tended to harden into certain rigid conventions.

The next poem in *Once a Week* was printed just three weeks

## ILLUSTRATORS OF POEMS AND NOVELS 3

later, and Hablot K. Browne supplied the cut, which is not a success, and is quite unlike the familiar Frenchified style of 'Phiz.' Here and there it is out of drawing; the expressionless features of the women, the looseness of the grouping and the general feeling of emptiness, hardly make it a worthy pictorial interpretation of 'The Three Maidens,' but I reproduce it none the less, as it is not without interest to-day. To 'Phiz' was also allotted the illustrating of Meredith's next two poems, 'Over the Hills' (August 20, 1859), and 'Juggling Jerry' (September 3, 1859), in the same periodical. Here we find the illustrator more happily inspired. There is spirit and movement and a touch of atmosphere in the vignette to the first-named poem, while the simple pathos of Juggling Jerry's end is at least suggested with some imagination in the second woodcut. 'Phiz' was also the illustrator of 'A Story-telling Party,' signed 'T,' in *Once a Week*, December 24, 1859, which Sir Francis Burnand has told us was written by Meredith, to whom Burnand had related some of the stories; but though much more in the vein of the artist as we know him in his illustrations to Dickens, I have not reproduced either of the comic illustrations which accompany that merry fiction.

Most noteworthy of all these *Once a Week* woodcuts are the three next in succession, the work of Sir John Millais. 'The Crown of Love' (December 31, 1859) gave the artist good scope for a drawing informed with passion and poetic feeling, which, in a beautifully balanced composition, he has expressed to perfection. But 'The Head of Bran' (February 4, 1860) was an even better opportunity for the pencil of a master, and here we have a picture of real distinction, entirely worthy of its subject. There is less that is characteristic in Millais's woodcut to 'The Meeting' (September 1, 1860), but there is a quiet beauty and a homely touch in it that suits the subject admirably.

Of the other two illustrated poems in the same periodical, 'The Patriot Engineer' (December 14, 1861) has a typical illustration by Charles Keene, every touch of character being closely observed and portrayed with the precision we always expect and never miss in the work of that great genius in black and white. The decorative detail and studied beauty of line and composition of the pre-Raphaelite school find an excellent example in the masterly drawing by F. A. Sandys, with which 'The Old Chartist' was adorned in the issue of February 2, 1862.

Were these the sum total of the illustrations to Meredith, they

would still be quite a noteworthy group; but while they are in many ways the most interesting, and contain at least three of the gems of the whole collection, their removal from the portfolio would have no appreciable effect on its bulk.

In going through the illustrations to 'Evan Harrington' to-day one feels that it was on the whole a happy chance when the editor of *Once a Week* gave the story to Charles Keene to illustrate. Of all the author's novels this is the only one in which Keene could possibly have felt at home. It moves at times along the same paths of character which the artist was wont himself to pursue, and if at times it rises into the rarer atmosphere of high comedy, demanding of the artist a conception of beauty rather than character, Keene does not altogether fail even then. Here I have chosen from the forty-one illustrations a selection, which is at once typical of the whole series and of intrinsic artistic interest.

There is quiet dignity and strength in the picture of the Great Mel on his deathbed, with Mrs. Mel and Lady Rosely standing by. In every sense this is a model of story illustration, the detail being carefully studied, and yet the result is an admirably balanced composition. But of course we have Keene in his element when he is showing us old Tom Cogglesby's arrival at Beckley Court in his donkey-cart, and perhaps best of all in his drawing of the two quaint brothers over their Madeira at the Aurora. The languorous, affected manner of the Countess de Saldar he suggests very cleverly in his cut for Chapter XIX of the novel, but perhaps he makes that remarkable woman a thought too fleshy. He was always less successful with women than with men, and any student of his work in *Punch* will remark how seldom he introduced women into his drawings. We do not feel, for instance, that the beauty of Rose Jocelyn is realised in either of the illustrations I reproduce, but Evan Harrington is conceived on the lines of the author in both, as again in the very striking picture of him on horseback awaiting the onset of Laxley and Harry. The vignette of Evan's meeting with Susan Wheedle I have also thought worthy of reproduction, for though it lacks definition in the lower part, and the hands of the girl are out of drawing very badly, it has a fine sense of vigour and dramatic colour.

On the whole, Keene's illustrations are not an impertinence to the novelist, as so many illustrations of fiction are to-day. Where they lose somewhat as pictures is in a too conscientious effort to



*By permission of Messrs. Hutchinson,  
Adams & Co.]*

*[From the drawing by Sir John  
Pownall in 'Once a Week']*

#### THE SONG OF COURTESY.

'Take the true knight, may we  
Make the basest that be  
Beautiful ever by Courtesy !'





stick to the text, but it is a fault that, save where he falls short of feminine grace, is to be accounted a virtue in an illustrator. None of these woodcuts have ever been printed in volume form, I think, and Mr. Bernard Partridge supplied the frontispiece to the story in the 'New Popular Edition.'

If we could have had a combination of Keene and Du Maurier to illustrate 'Evan Harrington' the result would have been as nearly perfect as it would be possible to attain; the one giving character, the other grace and that 'polite' touch which was foreign to Keene's work. But George Du Maurier—Meredith's most important illustrators, it will be noted, were both *Punch* men—did the illustrations for 'Harry Richmond' when the story appeared in *Cornhill*, and these charming drawings translate us at once into the realm of high comedy. By permission of Messrs. Smith Elder and Co., I am able to give a selection of Du Maurier's drawings.

The picture of Roy carrying his son Harry in his arms away from Riversley through the 'soft mild night,' that had witnessed the great storm between Squire Beltham and his son-in-law, is finely studied, and if that of Harry and Temple meeting the Princess Ottilia is on more conventional lines it is still instinct with grace and movement. Then, do we not see the very man, the splendid figure of romance, in the illustration of Richmond Roy, smoking his cigar and flipping idly the strings of his guitar, as he chats with Harry and Temple in 'High Germany'? And again, years later, when he re-introduces his son to Ottilia at Ostend? Then the picture of Ottilia, 'like a statue of Twilight,' makes one wish the same artist had given us his conception of the Countess de Saldar. The interest of the other drawings I have chosen centres in Richmond Roy—the figure of this great character having fascinated the artist as thoroughly as it does every reader of the book—and we see him in his strength and power at his meeting with Squire Beltham on the eve of his 'grand parade,' confounded when the squire 'has his last innings' and the grand parade is over, and towards his sunset when Harry returns to find Janet Ilchester the stay of his sinking father.

In the 'New Popular Edition' Mr. William Hyde has drawn a frontispiece for 'Harry Richmond' which is totally unlike anything of Du Maurier's. Instead of high comedy, which is always the note of Du Maurier, Mr. Hyde has given us a dramatic and masterly picture of Riversley on the great night when Roy came hammering at the door; the lighted windows, the stormy sky, and

full moon, are all suggestive of the tragic, but the picture is wholly admirable. A few notes on the other illustrators of the edition may here be added. Mr. C. O. Murray imparts a fine old-fashioned touch to his picture of 'The Magnetic Age' for 'Richard Feverel,' which was drawn in 1878; there is but little character in the frontispiece to 'The Egoist' by Mr. John C. Wallis, and Mr. Leslie Brooke's rather feeble line drawing of Robert and Aminta at the death-bed of Mrs. Armstrong is no great adornment to 'Lord Ormont and his Aminta,' while Mr. Sauber's plate to 'The Tale of Chloe' is distinctly conventional, illustrating the lines:

'Fear not, pretty maiden,' he said, with a smile;  
'And pray let me help you in crossing the stile.'  
She bobbed him a courtesy so lovely and smart,  
It shot like an arrow and fixed in his heart.

Unique among the illustrations of Meredith's poetry is the edition of 'Jump-to-Glory Jane' produced by the late Harry Quilter in 1892. This contains 'forty-four designs invented, drawn and written by Lawrence Housman.' The mis-spelling of Mr. Housman's name, which is printed in bold type on the title page and occurs again in the text, cannot have been a printer's error; but whether Mr. Laurence Housman used to spell his name with a 'w' I cannot say. That is a minor point. Here the pictures are the thing, rather than the poem or the critical notes wherewith the editor prefaced the little work.

The poem itself was first published in the *Universal Review*, in 1889, and the editor would seem to have endeavoured in vain to get an artist to illustrate it suitably there, but having determined that it was capable of imaginative treatment in black and white he carried out his idea a year or two later by entrusting Mr. Housman, then a young and promising artist, with the work. He had suggested Mr. Linley Sambourne to Meredith in 1889, as the right man to do the drawings, and the poet replied: 'Sambourne is excellent for *Punch*, he might hit the mean. Whoever does it should be warned against giving burlesque outlines.' For some reason or other Mr. Sambourne could not undertake it and Mr. Bernard Partridge was next applied to, but 'his heart failed him'—he was surely the last man to do the drawings, so that his heart did not misguide him!—and consequently the poem first appeared without illustrations. Later when Mr. Housman undertook the commission, the artist, whose imaginative touch is seen in all his

line work, as it has later found expression in both prose and verse, complete the series.

Here was the man for the work: he had just that restrained notion of the comic which blends into the weird, the imaginative, the mystic, the spiritual, and is so rare among artists. Mr. Sambourne would certainly not have made a success of the drawings, had he been so misguided as to undertake them. Mr. Housman did, so far as success was attainable.

Quilter very frankly criticises the drawings. 'They are not perfect by any means,' he says, 'and in many points open to serious criticism, but the root of the matter is in them—they have the rare qualities of imagination and sympathy, and from the technical point of view, they show that this artist has only to work to become an admirable designer.' They fail only in certain details of pen-work, it seems to me, indicating no weakness of the artist, but an inacquaintance with the limitations of process engraving, then less advanced than it is to-day, and the technique of which he speedily mastered.

As imaginative pictorial presentments of the poem they are wholly admirable. The 'wistful eyes, in a touching but bony face,' and the whole gaunt, pathetic figure of Jane are successfully realised. The subtle suggestion of the stained-glass saint in the jumping figure of Jane, as in the plate, showing the prophetess appearing before her first convert, 'Winny Earnes, a kind of woman not to dance inclined,' has a firmness and confidence of line which would have strengthened some of the other designs, while that illustrating the verse 'Those flies of boys disturbed them sore,' has a quaint touch of friendly humour in the figure of Daddy Green, in whom the boys seem chiefly interested.

Mr. Housman's drawings are certainly among the most interesting of all the Meredith illustrations, and one cannot but think that they must have had the approval of the poet himself, as they fully conform to the lines he had laid down for the illustrating of the poem, being charged with quiet but sympathetic satire of the religious mania he sought to expose, and never remotely leaning to burlesque: indeed, there is pity in them, as in the poem, and pity, as a rule, is no friend of satire.

To Mr. William Hyde are due some of the finest of recent illustrations to Meredith, and these entirely of nature scenes. Mr. Hyde's work is of a rare quality in nature-feeling and repose, with

just that touch of indefiniteness that leaves us still with a little of the mystery to colour our vision of the scene, so that no better illustrator of Meredith's poems could be imagined. The collection of 'Nature Poems of George Meredith,' published in 1898, with twenty full-page pictures in photogravure and an etched frontispiece by Mr. Hyde, is a real artistic treasure. For the two volumes of poems in the edition of 1898, Mr. Hyde drew the Châlet and Flint Cottage, and London Bridge as the frontispiece to 'One of Our Conquerors.' The view of Oxshott Woods which adorns 'Sandra Belloni' is also, I suspect, by Mr. Hyde, and he too may have drawn 'Off the Needles' which accompanies 'Beauchamp's Career,' but if so it is not quite in his usual style. There is a pretty wash drawing of Queen Anne's Farm to 'Rhoda Fleming' and 'The Old Weir,' finely suggestive of the romantic quietude of the scene, to 'Richard Feverel,' both by Mr. Harrison Miller, while Mr. Maxse Meredith contributes a dainty little line drawing of 'Crossways Farm' to 'Diana,' and there is a fine sunny wash of La Scala by Mr. Edward Thornton as frontispiece to 'Vittoria.' For 'The Amazing Marriage' a photographic view of a scene in Carinthia is thought sufficient, and a dignified, virile bust of Lassalle, evidently of German origin, is given as frontispiece to 'The Tragic Comedians.' One of the earliest and best of all the illustrations to Meredith is included in the 'New Popular Edition.' This is F. Sandys's well-known picture of 'Bhanavar among the Serpents of Lake Karatis,' a fine decorative work which was first engraved on steel for the 1865 edition of 'Shagpat' and the original of which in oils was exhibited at the Royal Academy show of English painters some years ago.

In the autumn of 1908 a most noteworthy addition was made to the gallery of Meredith illustrations in the shape of Mr. Herbert Bedford's fine series of miniature portraits of 'Meredith Heroines,' exhibited at the Doré Gallery from October 23 to November 18. Mr. Bedford takes eminent rank among the illustrators of Meredith by virtue of these exquisite little paintings on ivory. For many years the thoughts of this well-known miniaturist had been so engaged with Meredith's womenfolk that he set himself the delightful task of searching out fair sitters who already possessed many of the physical charms of the heroines, determined to interpret in a series of beautiful ivories the Meredithian women who had most captured his fancy. His paintings are thus idealised portraits of actual ladies who, more or less, 'fill the bill' of the novelist in the



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matter of good looks, and few who saw Mr. Bedford's exhibition will deny the genuine feeling for character which he displays in his interpretation of these famous figures of the novelist's imagination.

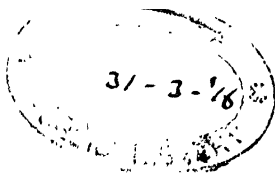
In all, fifteen subjects have been exhibited by the artist, and where the quality of all is so even it is not easy to indicate preferences. His Lucy is certainly worthy of Ripton Thompson's 'She's an angel!' and Mrs. Mount is admirably caught, in a way to justify her creator's declamation that 'she could read men with one quiver of her half-closed eyelashes.' If anything, I prefer Keene's Louisa, Countess de Saldar—although Keene so often failed in depicting women—to Mr. Bedford's. There is, of course, no real comparison of the two pictures; Keene's easy, confident pencil lines against Mr. Bedford's meticulous brush and colours. But I feel that Mr. Bedford's is too charming a face—it is a little gem of painting, the black of the Portuguese head-dress against the delicate flesh tints being perfectly contrived—too charming for that lady, whose affectation of indolence is so happily suggested by Keene. On the other hand, Mr. Bedford's Rose Jocelyn is as successful as Keene's is stodgy and ungraceful, while his Caroline makes one almost willing to agree with George Uploft, when he said of her, 'The handsomest gal, I think, I ever saw!'

From 'The Egoist' Mr. Bedford has taken, of course, Clara and Lætitia, and he is more successful, I fancy, with the latter, more to the book, that is to say, giving us some real hint of the character, for which he has chosen the words of Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, 'Here she comes with a romantic tale on her eyelashes.' This Mr. Bedford has used as his text and applied admirably. But Clara seems to me too literally the 'dainty rogue in porcelain,' with a shortage of character in her girlishly pretty face. The three subjects from 'Rhoda Fleming,' however, are all brilliantly successful. Dahlia is a blonde beauty of the freshest, and caught in that moment when, before her mirror, she herself has said, 'There were times when it is quite true I thought myself a Princess.' Rhoda, if she has a fault in Mr. Bedford's hands, seems too capable of sympathy, she lacks suggestion of hardness, but certainly 'she has a steadfast look in her face.' Mrs. Lovell, fair and fascinating, is as surely the imaged figure of Meredith's imagination as Diana, with her dark hair and dignified mien is curiously suggestive both of the fact and the fiction of that character. The serene-minded Lady Dunstane companions Diana, and from 'The Amazing Marriage'



Mr. Bedford has chosen Carinthia, Livia, and Henrietta, which complete the series.

I believe that he contemplates pursuing his most praiseworthy labours, to the end that he may produce a gallery of similar miniatures representative of the leading feminine characters in all the novels. Whether this be achieved or not, Mr. Bedford has already done a very notable work, which gives him an unique place among the illustrators of Meredith.



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## SOME PRESS OPINIONS

ON

### ‘George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism’ by J. A. Hammerton

**Mr. W. T. Stead in the ‘Review of Reviews.’**—In this handsome and copiously illustrated volume he has collected, condensed, and edited the vast mass of printed matter about Meredith which appeared in his lifetime . . . a useful compilation containing a great mass of information and of criticism that might otherwise have been forgotten.

**Sir W. Robertson Nicoll in the ‘British Weekly.’**—Mr. Hammerton seems to me to have done his work intelligently and well. His book must be referred to by future writers on Meredith, and even those who are not students will find it pleasant and interesting reading. . . . Mr. Hammerton has taken great pains and gathered together most of the recorded facts.

**Mr. Henry S. Salt in the ‘Morning Leader.’**—A well-composed study . . . an extremely painstaking compilation, from various sources, of a number of noteworthy appreciations and criticisms, well chosen and well put together, with a connecting comment of his own. . . . Those who wish to know all that is at present known about George Meredith, and the best things that have been written about his character and his creations, will find Mr. Hammerton in most respects an excellent guide.

**Mr. Edward Clodd in the ‘Daily Chronicle.’**—His involved great labour on the part of Mr. Hammerton, whose care to be exact reminds us of Boswell’s remark in the preface to his immortal work that he was ‘sometimes obliged to run half over London in order to fix a date correctly.’ And in the matter of condensation we can readily believe Mr. Hammerton when he says that ‘the reading of a whole volume is sometimes represented by a passing reference of a few lines.’

## PRESS OPINIONS

**Mr. W. L. Courtney in the 'Daily Telegraph.'**—Mr. Hammerton says that his aim has been to produce that which may prove to all Meredithians 'a companionable and useful book.' In this he may be said to have succeeded. The volume proves that he has ranged so far and wide in search of materials that to the most devoted of Meredithians he will have brought something fresh.

**Mr. Edward Garnett in the 'Daily News.'**—In this volume, which is the fruit of an amazing industry and years of laborious research, Mr. Hammerton has brought together practically everything in Meredithiana that is worth rescuing from 'the long wash of Press matter' (in Meredith's own phrase) of the last fifty years. Moreover, the compilation is redeemed from the ordinary scissors and paste article by the systematic and clear method in which the author has arranged his material.

**Mr. James Douglas in the 'Star.'**—Mr. J. A. Hammerton has done a very new and a very refreshing piece of work. . . . He has winnowed the Meredithiana of half a century. He has moulded these materials into a book which is interesting from the first page to the last. It is very hard to lay it down, for Mr. Hammerton has a sure knack of seizing upon the vivid and avoiding the stale. I took up the volume with the intention of dipping into it with a desultory eye, but I found myself cajoled into reading forward and backward until I had read it all. The fascination of the book is largely due to Mr. Hammerton's skill in the presentation of his quotations. He has arranged his selections with a masterly sense of proportion. I think the book will be welcomed by all Meredithians.

**M. Henri D. Davray in the 'Mercure de France.'**—La tâche était grosse d'embarras et d'obstacles; il y fallait un labeur énorme, beaucoup d'intelligence et de perspicacité, et surtout une correction et un tact qui ne devaient jamais se trouver en défaut. La façon dont l'auteur se tire de l'épreuve est digne de tous éloges . . . . Chacun des dix-sept chapitres du volume fourmille de renseignements utiles et intéressants. . . . Quiconque voudra connaître Meredith devra se munir de ce livre comme d'une préface et d'un commentaire indispensables.

**The Spectator**—Mr. Hammerton tells us in his preface, what one may well believe from a survey of the book, that it is the result of five years' loving labour. . . . The labour involved in its construction must have been immense, for there is little that has been published about Meredith which Mr. Hammerton has not read, and at the same time he has not contented himself with collecting excerpts from others, but has woven them so deftly into his narrative that, in spite of his self-effacement, he has made a truly personal book of his own, and one that gives a notable and much-needed picture of Meredith's personality.

## PRESS OPINIONS

**The Observer.**—This great and laborious work of collation and annotation. Mr Hammerton is overwhelmingly conscientious in his work. . . . To walk among the contemporaries, the friends and the creations of Meredith, is a journey that keeps its incessant delight even to the end of 400 pages. . . . We may well be grateful to Mr. Hammerton for a work of criticism and explanation almost monumental in its thoroughness.

**The Times**—Its aim is one which will appeal to many Meredithians. . . . A large undertaking, which nevertheless may be said to be successfully accomplished.

**The Standard**—The earnest Meredithian will be pleased with the result of Mr Hammerton's conscientious labours. . . . Mr. Hammerton is, perhaps, most interesting in dealing with Meredith's early life. . . . As to Meredith's probable place in literature, Mr. Hammerton takes a very sane and judicial view.

**The Globe**—This is a book which will naturally be read by every lover of Meredith's works. It is an astonishing book, for it contains a fairly full reprint of much of the criticism, gossip, appreciation, attacks, and vindications that Meredith's writings inspired. It must have required tremendous industry to get the requisite matter together, but the author is an admirer, yet by no means a slavish admirer of Meredith, and that explains much of the reason for its appearance so soon after the death of the great novelist. The thing is certainly well done.

**The Westminster Gazette**—Mr J. A. Hammerton, in his 'George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism,' has brought together a remarkable amount of information from a multitude of sources concerning the life and work of the great novelist whom we recently lost. But the book is not all quotations by any means. Mr. Hammerton links his extracts together by many passages of criticism, able and apt. If he had done no more, however, than unearthed the many comments here printed, and arranged them as he has done, in excellent order, he would have rendered a valuable service to the literary historian.

**The Athenæum.**—In compiling his 'George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism,' Mr J. A. Hammerton has shown discretion and admirable industry. He has succeeded in gathering reminiscences of real interest. . . . Other printed sources of value which require a wide knowledge of books to discover are effectively used.

**The Manchester Guardian**—Within its limits, complete, painstaking, and even tasteful.

**The Northern Whig**—Mr. Hammerton's laborious compilation . . . will have a real historical value.

## PRESS OPINIONS

**The Glasgow Herald.**—This very interesting book, a monument of industry and open-eyed research, by the indefatigable author of 'Stevensoniana.' . . . The matter would have been interesting even if badly arranged, but Mr. Hammerton has arranged it well, and though the author by no means completely effaces himself—some of the shrewdest criticisms, indeed, are to be found in his own text—he seldom departs from his self-assumed office of compiler, arranger, and commentator. . . . Mr. Hammerton's book is one to read, and to use rather than to criticise; it is one of those books that one could write columns about without making any appreciable inroad upon its contents, or dismiss in a few lines through sheer despair of giving an adequate notion of its scope.

**The New York Times.**—This excellent study. . . . The immense amount of research and study makes it an invaluable contribution to Meredithiana.

**The Northern Echo.**—Again I say that no student of Meredith can safely ignore this handsome and comprehensive volume.

**The Sunday Times.**—A book which will be extremely valuable—nay, indispensable—to the Meredithian student as a work of reference. . . . His book ought to find a place in every library, and will have to be taken into account by any future biographer of the novelist.

**The World.**—Care, moderation, and sanity of judgment mark its it is a handy book of reference, and it preserves many opinions that are preserving.

# REFERENCE





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## REFERENCE



the treasure it contains, the hidden coin seems of little worth. In this story there are picturesqueness and spendthrift imagery to excess. It abounds in fantastic imagination, some of which is startling and impressive; but more often the effect is so extravagant as to excite an unpleasant mental vertigo. Especially is this so in the last part, with its colossal conflict of lightnings, vultures, scorpions, and the bird Khoorook, having wings a league long. And all this gigantic spectacle centres upon the rich and hairy clothier, Shagpat, whose false power resides in a single hair of his head, called 'The Identical,' which finally rises up, and burns for three days and nights; then turns into a fiery serpent, and emits a stream of other fiery serpents. There is a wide difference between even the wildest flights of sane imagination and the fantasies of mania. It is hard to conceive how Mr. Meredith could have conjured up these half-delirious phantoms without losing the best part of his head amongst them. Possibly they were applied with deliberation, by himself, as a test of his own steadiness; a discipline, a temptation, such as the anchorites and ascetics of earlier times considered indispensable to their equipment for final victory. Meredith appears to have passed through this particular temptation with colours flying forward. He has not since exposed himself to the sorcery of unbridled fancies. But no one could have predicted, from Shagpat, the future novelist.

'Farina; a Legend of Cologne,' has also been coldly neglected of the critics, and George Eliot's is the only noteworthy review of it. Parsons Lathrop considers that 'Farina' is not worthy of notice, except for giving token of Teutonic influence, 'traceable elsewhere through his writings, in an evident familiarity with German localities, a fondness for alliteration, tortured compound words, and an inverted order of construction.' He then goes on to say :

Whether this came from direct contact with German literature, or was derived from the impress of Carlyle, whose grandiose manner of manipulating little things is frequently echoed in Meredith, it is impossible to judge. But the spurious Orientalism of 'Shagpat' and the somewhat tawdry Germanism of *Farina* are interspersed with bits of verse little better than sublimated doggerel or the delusive Eastern poems of Mirza Schaffy; and Meredith has never quite shaken off his fondness for introducing this kind of sham pasteboard verse, which assumes the appearance of real golden goblets on the stage, into his serious novels. I have a suspicion, although I may be wrong, that in these two early compositions he had been emboldened by the example of Thackeray's success in semi-extravaganza. Natural gifts and power of expression they undoubtedly show; but the writer was trifling with his powers and gifts, and had not yet found his field. It was not until 1859, when



I like sunshine after smart rain the Lord shows in these brothers — / H. 297c i (chap. tr. VIII)

JOHN AND ANDREW COCKLES AT THE 'AURORA'

I like sunshine after smart rain the Lord shows in these brothers — / H. 297c i (chap. tr. VIII)



## NOVELS IN CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM 201

he had reached the age of thirty-two, that he produced 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' his first mature novel, charged to the brim with earnestness, wit, strength of conception.

'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' with the possible exception of 'The Egoist,' has been the most widely discussed of all the novels. The work of his 'prentice hand, forsooth, remains after half-a-century one of its author's most characteristic achievements. To Mr. Justin McCarthy belongs the credit of having been the first critic of note to attempt a serious exposition of the book; this, in the *Westminster Review* of July, 1864, under the theme of 'Novels with a Purpose,' reprinted later in the author's 'Con Amore.' I quote from the article in question as follows:

'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' is a novel of the thoughtful, deep, half-cynical, wholly earnest kind which has so often striven, perhaps not with single success, to arrest the attention of a public only craving for easy entertainment. It is somewhat in the style of Sterne; a good deal in the style of one who, acknowledging himself a follower of Sterne, had a warmer heart, a purer soul, and a richer, quainter fancy than the British sentimentalist, I mean Jean Paul Richter. Mr. Meredith is often strikingly like Richter in style, with, almost as a matter of necessity, a considerable dash of Carlylese phraseology. Here and there, indeed, something of unmistakable and pure Carlyle flashes in.

'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' is full of passages which are rich in quaint poetic beauty; full of keen, pungent, epigrammatic sayings; of sharp, shrewd reflections revealing much insight into the realities of human nature; of the warm glow of an ardent, manly heart, and of a tender, graceful, genial blending of love and pity. Utterly unlike in its plan and its personages, the book somehow reminds one frequently of Richter's 'Flegeljahre'; only that with George Meredith the ways and weaknesses and virtues of the two brothers seem fused into the form of Richard Feverel. It is essentially a book with a purpose.

It is not a very pleasant book. The mere quaintnesses and fantastic eccentricities of the style, though modest and sober when compared with those in which Richter revels, are quite enough to warn the commonplace novel reader at the very beginning that these paths are rather thorny and tangled for his easy lounging walk. But apart from merely superficial objections, the story, with all its beauty, tenderness, and boldness, leaves a melancholy, and what is perhaps worse, an unsatisfactory impression behind it.

People in general do not now, I think, read Rousseau's 'Emile'; but those who are familiar with that masterpiece of a dead philosophy will probably agree with me as to the profoundly unsatisfactory and

disheartening impression which its catastrophe leaves on the mind. Was it for this, the reader is inclined to ask, that science and love did their utmost to make one path smooth, one human existence bright, and noble, and happy? Was Emile from his birth upward trained to the suppression of every selfish thought, to the scorn of all ignoble purpose, to an absolute devotion for truth, courage, purity, and benevolence, only that he might be deceived in his dearest affections, and that the crowning act of his existence might be an abnegation of self which we can scarcely even regard with admiration? The author had a right to shape his moral and deal with his creations as he would, yet we feel pained and shocked that he should have deemed it right to act thus harshly towards the beloved offspring of his system.

Something of this surprise and disappointment fills the mind when we have reached the close of Richard Feverel's ordeal, and find that he has left his brightest hopes and dearest affections dead and buried behind him. The book closes with a snap or crash; we feel as if something were suddenly wrenched away with pain and surprise; a darkness falls down upon the mind. Artistically I cannot help regarding this as a defect, although, of course, it is strictly in keeping with a recognition of the possibilities and even the daily chances of life. The course of the story does not lead us to expect anything of the kind, while its whole construction does lead us to expect a harmonious and dramatic conclusion. If Lady Castlewood in 'Esmond' were to die suddenly of an unexpected fever; if Romola were to be killed off, like the wicked personage in one of Massinger's plays, by a flash of lightning, no one could say that either of these catastrophes was out of the common range of human probabilities. But a work of fiction, whether novel or drama, requires harmony, coherence, or sequence; and, although talent can assert its powers over us in defiance of this law, yet it assuredly forfeits some of its legitimate influence when it fails to acknowledge it. One cannot see why poor little Lucy, Richard Feverel's gentle, innocent, loving wife, should be sacrificed in order that the ordeal of her husband should be made the more severe. In human nature, is such an ordeal really purifying and strengthening? Is heavy, unexpected, and, it must be added, really unmerited, calamity calculated to make the sufferer brave, and strong, and faithful? Truly, I doubt it. And I doubt still more whether the ardent, impulsive, fitful sort of being Mr. Meredith has painted as his hero, would become any the *better* for having so fantastic and remorseless a penalty attached by fate to his father's system and his own single transgression.

The late Allan Monkhouse, in his temperate and painstaking study of the novels, written for the *Manchester Quarterly*, October, 1890, and reprinted in his 'Books and Plays,' deals thus with

Meredith's first novel, which he describes as 'perhaps the most widely admired of his works':

Whether 'Richard Feverel' is the best of his novels or not, it contains much of his finest quality. . . . Richard and Lucy are our modern Ferdinand and Miranda, whose fortunes are wrecked by a blind and infatuated Prospero. A Prospero whom the winds and waves do not obey, whose belief in his spells is unshaken, and whose attitude of command is unreleased till the peremptory awakening of calamity is at once a comic and a tragic spectacle. . . . But Sir Austin is essentially a tragic character, and if there is some justice in the objection that the story's strange and pitiful ending is not inevitable as a tragic issue should be, it is, I think, because his position is not sufficiently enforced. He is a man of high intelligence and noble aims, whose fatal pedantry brings ruin and misery upon the son he loves. Of Richard's own contribution to the calamitous tangle in his neglectful absence from his wife, it is not easy to speak. It is inexplicable to the gross and literal sense of the dogged school of criticism, but we may take comfort in remembering that other inconsequent writer who taught us that 'cause and will and strength and means' may be a prelude with no succeeding act, and who has left unanswered and unanswerable the portentous question:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil  
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

The humour of 'Richard Feverel' is constant in operation and eminent in quality. It is sometimes snatched from the very jaws of tragedy, as in those daring and delightful episodes, the historical readings of the infatuated and bewildered Lord Mountfalcon. It gives us a wretched dyspeptic engaged on a history of Fairy Mythology and a 'wise youth,' himself a humorist, whose philosophy is cunningly undermined by his contemptuous author. Of its pathos I will only say that the last chapter is one of the most moving things in our literature.

But Mr. W. C. Brownell insists on the artificial character of the novel as a whole. He uses it to illustrate that perversity which he esteems the chief characteristic of Meredith's fiction.

The most noteworthy example of this perversity (says Mr. Brownell) is his one great tragedy, 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' his first and, in the view of his most thoroughgoing admirers, his greatest book. It is a marvel of artificiality imposed upon the reader as exactly the converse. It assumes to record the remorseless working of relentless fate, and is in reality a remarkable piece of imaginative ingenuity as little convincing as a tract. Its frame-



work and premises are ingeniously unnatural and it contains hardly a natural person, save the victims of the unnatural conduct of the others. The book is thus addressed directly to the nerves rather than to the mind or the heart, and in this respect is no more a book *de bonne foy* than the most painful of Maupassant's. The principle against which it offends is perfectly plain. The element of fate in tragedy to be legitimate must be fatalistic. In 'Feverel' one feels that it is absolutely facultative. Richard's ordeal would dissolve into the simplest of idyls at several stages in the development of the story, if it were not for the author's wilful ingenuity, exercised to the end of making the reader writhe. Being so quintessentially artificial, it is extremely typical of the succession of novels which thus ominously it introduced. It contains some of the best writing, some of the most winning scenes, some of the truest poetry to be found in Mr. Meredith's writings. But a tragedy of which the reader resents the obviously voluntary pre-determination of the author to exact the utmost possible tribute of distress from him is not so much tragedy as melodrama, and melodrama thoroughly sophisticated. Its psychology places it on a high plane for melodrama, but cannot disguise its character. And it is not difficult to see in the author's attitude toward his needlessly suffering characters the spirit which reveals Parrhasius, studying the contortions of his captive, as less a genuine artist than a dilettante à outrance.

On the other hand, while Mr. James Oliphant, in his 'Victorian Novelists,' seems to feel, though in a less degree than Mr. Brownell, the arbitrariness of the novelist's manner in dealing out doom to his personages, he is prepared to defend the death of Lucy as artistically inevitable. Moreover, we might ask, is it not true that in actual life Providence may often be accused of melodrama?

Who can read the final scene between Richard and Lucy (says Mr. Oliphant) before he goes to fight his duel, and the letter of Lady Blandish to Austen Wentworth telling how it all ended, without being stirred to a pang of sympathy that is almost too deep and painful for tears? It is little wonder if, in self-defence, we passionately refuse to believe that Lucy really had to die before she could even understand that she was on the threshold of a new chastened happiness that gave promise of a lifelong endurance. But the author was right. Lucy must have died, and it is a proof of Meredith's courage as an artist that he told the truth boldly as he saw it, when every consideration of mercy towards himself and his readers would have prompted him to stay his hand.

As we pursue our study of Meredith criticism we become impressed by the fact that, immense and inexhaustible though the



*By permission of Messrs. Bradbury,  
Agnew & Co.]*

*[From the drawing by Charles Keene  
in "Once a Week,"*

#### TOM COGGLESBY'S ARRIVAL AT BECKLEY COURT.

The donkey-cart, in which old Tom Cogglesby sat alone, bunched in figure, bunched in face,  
his shrewd grey eyes twinkling under the bush of his eyebrows.

—*From Bleak House. Chapter XXVIII.*



mass of these writings be, they seem to centre round certain of the novels in detail, while others are curiously passed over with the merest references to certain of their characters and to some of the more outstanding episodes in them. 'The Egoist' is a sort of Aaron's rod that has swallowed up all the rest from the critic's point of view, though 'Richard Feverel' and 'Beauchamp's Career' have certainly had their share of consideration. But it is surprising that so rich and fascinating a book as 'Evan Harrington' has not had a greater share of critical attention. As regards our immediate purpose, however, there is no reason to complain, for two such scholarly critics as George Parsons Lathrop, in America, and Mr. Arthur Symonds, in England, have written about Meredith's second great novel with concentration of interest. Thus Parsons Lathrop:

The story unfolds a large picture of English life in certain of its phases, which is both amusing and instructive; but the author's quick discernment and lifelike delineation are set in a doughy mass of words. . . . The vicissitudes of young Evan Harrington are sketched with great gusto and, at times, with a most entertaining effect. Nothing could be better than the portrait of old Tom Cogglesby, and the account of a meeting between him and his brother Andrew at the Aurora tavern. The human nature is exact; the drawing is broad, yet nice; the tints are mellow; a delicious humour pervades the whole episode. But Evan's vagabond comrade, Jack Raikes, is a total failure. In him we discern the temporary sway of the Dickens star; but none other than Dickens himself could have done justice to this irregular personage. Meredith, in attempting to portray him, is ready enough with words to put into his mouth; but the mimetic or impersonating faculty does not answer at his call, and Mr. Raikes is all shell and no meat.

The Countess de Saldar—a scheming, insincere woman, affecting the airs of foreign nobility, even to her accent in speaking—is very much better rendered; but the recital of her wiles and the extracts from her letters are given at too great length. We know the character when the half has been told, and the added illustration of it becomes a dead weight. At last the bad tendencies in her are pushed to an extreme in her sudden amorous advances towards her sister's husband, Andrew. This is done abruptly; so that, while her action may be a logical enough outcome of her character, it appears precipitate, and makes an impression of purely superfluous coarseness.

In this pushing of his characters to an extreme, and his remorseless amplification of their attributes, he also betrays his overmastering impulse to make them absolute types. Obeying it, he makes of

'Mrs. Mel' Harrington, Evan's mother, an iron female, repulsive in her hard constancy to her humble position as the widow of the defunct tailor. . . . Mrs. Mel in reality would be a pathetic figure; but Meredith admits no hint of that likelihood. In his hands, she is purely an embodiment of harsh duty and fatefulness. Distinct and tangible she certainly is, in this aspect, as much so as the contact with cold metal. But it may be doubted whether she is humanly true. . . .

In spite of all its defects, 'Evan Harrington' contains more ingenuity of plot and is better constructed than most of its author's novels. A robust, rollicking humour pervades portions of it; and the chapter in which 'Old Mel's' daughters have to 'digest their father at dinner'—plainly speaking, suffer an exposure of their plebeian origin at a brilliant dinner-party—is not only fine, spirited and strong, but is also rendered tonic by a dash of searching satire. In this mixture of the bluff, sportive tone with wholesome castigation of shams, and with the intermittent moralising or discourse about his personages, which Meredith allows himself, we may, I think, accurately detect the occult control of Dickens and Thackeray, side by side. Not that the more recent writer is imitative of either; but he seems to have incorporated with his own singular and independent genius elements from the same sources on which those great but unlike masters drew.

I now quote the opinion of Mr. Arthur Symons from a review in *Time*, November, 1885, when 'Evan Harrington' came out in the first collected edition of the novels:

'Evan Harrington' is a story of modern society; not so philosophical, witty, profound, nor so deeply and pathetically tragic as 'Richard Feverel'—not so wildly adventurous, nor so romantic and fantastic as 'Harry Richmond,' but occupying a place midway between the two. Without being the greatest of Mr. Meredith's novels, it is the most evenly interesting, I think, the most easy, pleasant, absorbing, and ought to be one of the most widely popular. I have seen those who read 'Richard Feverel' with effort read 'Evan Harrington' with delight. . . . There are plots and counter-plots, very Machiavellian, but never vulgar, and all in the very best society, where the touching a nerve is the blood-spilling of uncivilised battles, and the heroes triumph in tone of the voice. In the midst of it all, Evan, a fine figure of genuine manliness, a gentleman of heart and breeding, if not of birth, acts unconscious of the toils which are being woven for his benefit and against it, until at length he is caught in them, and appears for a time to be a disgraced hero, and finally triumphs, as heroes do.

Following Parsons Lathrop's very able analysis of 'Evan Harrington' and Mr. Symons's hearty recommendation of the novel as a

piece of 'pure comedy, at once pleasant and bracing and inexhaustibly entertaining,' we are met by such a personal confession as this from Allan Monkhouse, who was no capricious admirer, but a sound critic :

I must confess that to me 'Evan Harrington' is the least worthy of Mr. Meredith's novels. The Countess de Saldar is not of the race of those great comic characters that justify themselves under any conditions. Never elsewhere has her author concerned himself so far with the presentation of a person essentially vulgar. She is an ordinary person in an extraordinary position, and 'Evan Harrington' is a comedy of circumstance rather than of character. The tenacity of an adventuress is not the most fruitful of themes for the creator of Richmond Roy and Sir Willoughby Patterne. She is a great success, but a success of a lower order. Rose and Evan are a delightful pair of lovers, Lady Jocelyn is excellent, and Mrs. Harrington, possibly the very best of minor woman characters, one of Mr. Meredith's strongest points. Mr. Raikes is, perhaps, dangerously near the line which separates the fantastical from the posterous, but with old Tom Cogglesby, who seems to have strayed from Dickens' collection, he contributes some very curious and characteristic humour.

Thus the critics differ, though as a comparison of the foregoing opinions will prove, they are largely in agreement on the details of character, sources of influence, and the esthetics of the novel. By the same roads they seem to arrive at different conclusions.

When we come to 'Sandra Belloni' (first published as 'Emilia in England') we have also to reckon with 'Vittoria,' to which the former stands as no more than the first half of an extremely long and somewhat turgid tale. 'Rhoda Fleming' comes between the two parts of the history of Emilia. Here we shall choose to consider the two novels as one, since they do not bear even the ordinary relationship of a story and its sequel.

In many respects (writes Parsons Lathrop) they are very characteristic of Meredith; yet it must be confessed that they present a substance almost impossible to analyze. How any one ever came to conceive these tales, to what purpose they were directed in his own mind, why he should be at the pains to gather in one group so heterogeneous a lot of characters, and how he commanded the patience to pursue the threads of their actions and emotions, I am at a loss to guess. . . .

The idea which the writer wished to convey was, I suppose, that a woman so entirely given up to the liberation of her native land as Emilia, or Vittoria, is conceived to have been must forego the happi-

ness of a genuine and complete union with any man. She destroyed the careers of her two English devotees, for the sake of Italy; but when she married Count Carlo she also sacrificed herself, because it turned out that her husband and herself were not wholly in unison, and that he did not trust her even in conspiracies for Italian freedom. Because he did not trust her, he lost his life in a futile revolt, and she was left to mourn him inconsolably. The lesson seems to be: For freedom and country everything must be sacrificed, even the love and the hopes of all individual patriots.

But if this be the meaning of these two novels, it surely might have been conveyed in much less space than Mr. Meredith has used. And he has filled the space, to the very horizon, with such a cloud of characters and so bewildering a mist of universal talkativeness that it is hard work to extract even this much of meaning from the thousand pages which are appropriated to the chosen theme. The best piece of portraiture discoverable in this two-part tragedy is the delineation of Barto Rizzi, the powerful, restless, mysterious Italian conspirator, of noble birth, relentless towards the treacherous, and suspecting everybody. This figure is worthy of Balzac; but, unhappily, it is not fully developed.

Still, when one looks back at these novels, and gives them the benefit of a liberal perspective, the character of Emilia (or Sandra, or Vittoria) comes out strongly in a large coherence and atones for many minor inconsistencies and, it may be added, for capital faults. It is under circumstances like these, when he is wrestling with the adversity of his own mistakes, that Meredith's great power of representing types comes to his rescue.

So Parsons Lathrop, obviously struggling to be just to the novelist, whom he admires, while he is endeavouring to square his personal likings with his critical instincts. But now observe Mr. Arthur Symonds—I quote from his review in *Time*, March, 1886—without the least embarrassment on the subject of Emilia :

The book forms the first volume of the history of Emilia Alessandra Belloni, than which it is doubtful whether its author has ever done better and more satisfactory work. Those less admirable qualities of Mr. Meredith, which some people find so objectionable—his excess of wit and overdose of humour, his too conspicuous cleverness, and the most fantastically fanciful flourishes of his style—are here controlled, in great measure, by a profound seriousness of aim, noticeable even in the brilliant social satire which forms one element of the book, and especially prominent in the character and development of Emilia. . . .

The book is full of practical wisdom, of healthy human sympathy, expressed often enough in terms of gentle satire; it is instinct with passion and poetry, weighted with intellectual seriousness, and



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# EVANS MEETING WITH SUSAN WHIFLII

Stri g t o i t i s l a t r a t i l h k i r s l i t l y S h r o w r a i s e d h e r  
h i l v t l i s w g r a t u l m t i o n l i e t h a t o f w a x r l s h o i g a w l t y o u r  
t e a r l e l r e a l f u l l y l a v a t h l i  
L i H r t j C l a t t i X





balanced by artistic symmetry; a book that lives, and that will live, being 'of imagination all compact,' when the novels of the day or the hour, merry dancers on the yet green graves of their fellows of yesterday, have danced, they, too, the dusty dance of death to extinction.

Again, let us turn for a moment to Mr. Ernest Newman's study of the novels, from which I have had occasion to quote in an earlier chapter :

By one set of critics, not too robust in themselves (writes Mr. Newman) he is lauded as the exposé of sentimentalism, against which modern vice he has raised the banner in 'Sandra Belloni' and in the preface to 'Diana.' It is hardly profitable to follow him into his analysis of sentimentalism; all the more so as the very books in which he wars against it are those in which he has inflicted upon us something almost worse than sentimentalism. One asks, after reading 'Sandra Belloni,' wherein the sentimental ladies, Arabella, Adela, and Cornelia, and the sentimental gentlemen, Barrett and Wilfrid, are worse than the heroic Merthyr and the heroic Georgiana. Certainly it would be hard to find two more insufferable incarnations of the prig than these. Mr. Meredith's complacent declaration that he is on the side of the angels creates in us, when we see the company he keeps, an insatiable longing to be on the side of the other immortals.

Truly when the critics are so discordant what is the plain man to do? So far as 'Sandra Belloni' and 'Vittoria' are concerned, I suspect the plain man of leaving them unread, whereby he misses some rare delights, but also saves himself the yawns of a tedious tale. It is not the least of the drawbacks of the long history of Emilia that the first half of it is well-nigh stagnant, devoted to subtleties of character analysis, yet a reading of it is essential to the proper appreciation of the second, which moves to the throb of revolution and burning patriotism, amid scenes that glow like summer landscapes in the memory. Moreover, 'Vittoria' has no Mrs. Chump to disfigure it. Perhaps the truth about these two books—if there can be such a thing as truth where the personal equation modifies so much—is midway between the opinions of Parsons Lathrop and Mr. Symons. It seems to me that one could illustrate all Meredith's great qualities from these two books, and some of his defects also, though curiously little could be quoted against his style, which is here, but especially in 'Vittoria,' at its supplest. Neither is a masterpiece in the sober sense of the word, and let them sneer at George Eliot who will, 'Romola' is safer for immortality

than 'Sandra Belloni.' That the novelist has made one of his supremest efforts in the character of Sandra is obvious, but all else has been subordinated to that, and despite so many beauties of description, thought, and action, there is the fatal lack of cohesion. What no critic has pointed out, to my knowledge, has always been present in my mind as a grave defect of 'Vittoria'—the failure to image the whole picture of Milan and Lombardy in revolt. We have a series of detached 'episodes,' told with much spirit, but the opportunity for an immense and thrilling spectacle of the whole, such as Zola could have realised, is frittered away in sketchy incidents, and no more than a spoonful of the boiling passions of the revolt bubbles in Meredith's pages.

If in the criticism of the novels we may be surprised at the lack of attention which 'Sandra Belloni' and 'Vittoria' have elicited, we shall be much more surprised to discover how little 'Rhoda Fleming' has attracted the critics. Surely it is in this great tragedy that Meredith is for the first time absolute master of his art. Why 'Richard Feverel' should have moved more brethren of the pen to ecstasies of admiration is one of the many inexplicable things in literary criticism. Perhaps it is because the first novel is a more 'pleasant' story. But that should not weigh with those whose function it is to seek out what is good in art and give it greeting. With the public, yes. One cannot understand why 'Rhoda Fleming' has never caught the patrons of the circulating library as 'Diana of the Crossways' and 'Richard Feverel' have caught them. Can there be something in titles after all? Certainly there is nothing in the simple title of 'Rhoda Fleming' to awaken any notion of the tremendous power of the story, its grim tragedy, its human passion, and profound interest for all who think squarely about the issues of this our life. But all these things, not patent to the general skimmer of current fiction, should be clear as noonday to those who practise criticism, and yet I could mention many an able study of Meredith's prose in which the name of Rhoda Fleming has only a passing nod from the writer. No other work of the same hand could better be advanced as a reply to the criticism that Meredith does not know how to 'jine his flats.' The intensity of his problem has fused its whole exposition in a way that was hardly to be expected in 'Richard Feverel,' where a theory of life furnishes the motive of the plot, and not a very present and heart-searching reality, such as we have here to consider. The result is a work of admirable balance, just proportions, and an ineluctable tragic fitness.

Somewhat against the scheme of this chapter, I have been tempted to expression of personal opinion, to refrain from which is almost Spartan austerity in one whose vocation is to write of books, but I must make way for the opinions of two critics of eminent authority, who differ widely in their conclusions. It was twenty years after its first unsuccessful publication that the late W. E. Henley reviewed the novel in the *Athenæum*, on its re-issue in the first collected edition, and his review is reprinted in 'Views and Reviews.' His theory of the failure of the novel with the public was based on the disagreeable nature of the problem it presents and its 'scathing attack upon the superstitions of respectability,' for the public 'cares for no passion that is not decent in itself, and whose expression is not restrained.' That the public, moreover, is not attracted by problems 'capable of none save a tragic solution' is also a just observation, and there, no doubt, we have the explanation. Of 'passion deeply felt and poignantly expressed,' Henley considers 'there is such a feast in "Rhoda Fleming" as no other English novelist alive has spread.' But he does not disguise the failures of the book, as, for instance, Anthony, the old bank porter—'such a failure as only a great novelist may perpetrate and survive'—Algernon the fool, 'of whom his author is so bitterly contemptuous that he is never once permitted to live and move and have any sort of being whatever,' and 'the chivalrous Percy, and the inscrutable Mrs. Lovell,' whom he describes as 'two gentle ghosts whose proper place is the shadow-land of the American novel.' Remove these, and a 'treasure of reality remains.' In a white heat of artistic joy in the work of his novelist the great critic then goes on :

What an intensity of life it is that hurries and throbs and burns through the veins of the two sisters—Dahlia the victim, Rhoda the executioner! Where else in English fiction is such a 'human oak log' as their father, the Kentish yeoman, William Fleming? And where in English fiction is such a problem presented as that in the evolution of which these three—with a following so well selected and achieved as Robert Armstrong and Jonathan Eccles and the evil ruffian Sedgett, a type of the bumpkin gone wrong, and Master Gammon, that type of the bumpkin old and obstinate, a sort of human saurian—are dashed together, and ground against each other till the weakest and best of the three is broken to pieces?

Mr. Meredith may, and does, fail conspicuously to interest you in Anthony Hackbut and Algernon Blancove and Percy Waring; but he knows every fibre of the rest, and he makes your knowledge as intimate and comprehensive as his own. With these he is never

at fault and never out of touch. They have the unity of effect, the vigorous simplicity, of life that belong to great creative art; and at their highest stress of emotion, the culmination of their passion, they appeal to, and affect, you with a force and a directness that suggest the highest achievement of Webster.

It has been objected to the climax of 'Rhoda Fleming' that it is unnecessarily inhumane, and that Dahlia dead were better art than Dahlia living and incapable of love and joy. But the book, as I have said, is a merciless impeachment of respectability; and as the spectacle of a ruined and broken life is infinitely more discomfiting than that of a noble death, I take it that Mr. Meredith was right to prefer his present ending to the alternative, inasmuch as the painfulness of that impression he wished to produce and the potency of that moral he chose to draw are immensely heightened and strengthened thereby.

Oddly enough it is on 'Rhoda Fleming' that Mr. William Watson fastens in his famous article on 'Fiction—Plethoric and Anæmic' (*National Review*, October, 1889), to illustrate the chief defects of Meredith as he conceives them:

Like most of his books (says Mr. Watson) it is an ill-constructed and very unequally written story, having some fine scenes and clever, if equally unattractive, character studies. If only an author could live by virtue of sporadic good things! But a novelist, at all events, cannot. The nominal and official heroine is a farmer's daughter, beloved by Bob Eccles, *alias* Robert Armstrong, and eventually married to him. She does not give evidence of caring very much for him, and therein she certainly has our sympathies, since we do not care for him either. A more thoroughly uncompanionable and unmagnetic young man the writer does not remember to have met, even in real life. . . . The tragedy of the story is the fate of Rhoda's beautiful sister Dahlia, who has been led astray by a well-born young London lover, Edward Blancove. He is perhaps the most realisable person in the book, and as such its most satisfactory piece of portraiture. A young man of the world, not without ambition and some thin, hard intellectuality; entirely incapable of heroism, yet not deliberately a scoundrel, he wins Dahlia's trust, and betrays it. Circumstances, he subsequently explains, have been against him. For a while he seems to have deserted her utterly, but in the end he returns to her, truly penitent, and filled with an ardour of atonement. One does not see what motive impels him to this course, which might not be presumed to have been equally operative all along, but anyhow he turns up at the eleventh hour, for the purpose of righting Dahlia's wrongs, so far as he may. At this point Rhoda for the first time emerges into positive action. She has hitherto been pictured as a young woman





of great and rather stubborn moral force, but playing a very passive part in the story. She now displays an amount of cruel wrong-headedness that goes far to place her outside the reader's sympathy. She thinks it her duty to frustrate the union of the lovers, from hatred and contempt of the man who has wronged her sister, but whose present conduct argues, if not heroism, at least reclamation. The scene where Dahlia discovers how Rhoda has blindly injured her, and barred the way against returning happiness, is very moving and powerful. It has a convulsive, paroxysmal kind of strength which recalls the fine things in some of the more spasmodic of our old dramatists. Unfortunately, like many another of Mr. Meredith's strong scenes, it is led up to by a sequence of moral incredibilities which admit of no intellectual defence. . . . In the way of story he has not very much to tell, and he is obscure simply because he has not an aptitude for telling it. There is literally no construction, but a certain not too great abundance of material lying loose about in various stages of disorder.

Here Mr. Watson's judgment is, to me at least, impossible of acceptance, though I realise the sincerity and masterliness of his critical method and find myself in sympathy with other opinions of his. Rather do I join with Mr. Symons in thinking that the book is Meredith's masterpiece in tragedy and that 'the plot is woven with singular closeness and deft intricacy; its exciting interest leading on the eye and mind at a gallop.'

When we turn to 'The Adventures of Harry Richmond' we approach a novel that has enjoyed both popular favour—it is one of the four 'best selling' works of Meredith, the others being 'The Egoist,' 'Diana' and 'Richard Feverel'—and ample attention from the critics. It does not rank with 'Rhoda Fleming' as a literary achievement, but it is largely inspired by the spirit of romance and that may account for the public liking it. A pure romance, of course, it is not, since there is analysis of character and study of emotions here as in all Meredith's fiction, if in a less degree, and both are foreign to romance. It might fairly be classed as romantic, but Mr. Symons proclaims it as 'that rare thing, a romance,' without modification, while Parsons Lathrop finds it fit in with his notion of the romantic until it is halfway through, when he considers that it breaks down utterly as a story, and Mr. W. L. Courtney seems never at all to have been caught by the romantic charm of the earlier chapters. I may here remark, what is perhaps already obvious, that I turn naturally to the writing of Mr. Arthur Symons and of the late George Parsons Lathrop for the purposes of this



chapter, as they are among the few critics of note who have dealt with the chief novels individually, Lathrop, especially, affording us some cameo-like studies which help us to realise each book by itself rather than as part of an inorganic whole, and it is with the individual books, not with any effort to fix them into a purely fanciful relativeness, that we are for the moment concerned. Let me first quote from Mr. Arthur Symons's review in *Time*, August, 1886 :

Here in 'Harry Richmond' we have a romance of the very best sort; rousing, enthralling, exciting, full of poetry, and a serious and masterly study in character. On a first reading we are fairly swept away and carried along by the racing tide of the narrative; for bustle and movement, for breathless and almost exhausting speed of telling, I know but few stories to equal it. Brilliant and fantastically lighted pictures flit past, like the slides of a magic lantern. Almost before one is gone another follows. Only on a calm retrospect, or after a second reading, do we properly realise all the painstaking perfection and strenuous realism of the character drawing, and the superb intellectual quality of the book.

With all respect to Mr. Symons, a critic with whom to err were still better than to be correct with others one might name, he does not see quite clearly into this story of 'Harry Richmond,' though he is sound in his criticism of details. Romance and the romantic are by no means synonymous terms in serious criticism, the former is concerned with the spirit of place and the realm of pure imagination. 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is about the last note of true romance in English. The romantic permits of character, and where character dominates all, as finally it does in 'Harry Richmond,' then even the romantic is abandoned for the novel of character. This, George Parsons Lathrop seems to feel quite clearly in his *aperçu* of the story, which here follows, for he speaks of the earlier adventures as 'seeming to have happened to ourselves'—their romantic spirit is thus implied.

In 'Harry Richmond' the want of proportion is once more painfully felt (says Lathrop); yet there, too, we find magnificent studies of character, massive—monolithic, if the term be allowable—as though they had been hewn out of solid rock. Such are Harry himself; his father, Richmond Roy, the motive of whose life is his claim to bastard royal descent; choleric old Squire Beltham; his niece Janet; and that woman of ideal grandeur and sweetness, Princess Ottilia. All the earlier part of the book, which relates to Harry's boyhood, schooldays, and boyish loves as described by

himself, is fascinating beyond description. Everything that occurs seems to have happened to ourselves. For the time being we live in his world, and there seems to be no other world at all in our experience. But this illusion does not last.

The story breaks down utterly, in the middle. Continual hammering on one line of effect dulls the edge. The length of the narrative, too, the multitude of persons introduced, and their all but endless involvements tax the attention beyond endurance. Yet the unabated energy with which old Roy, gradually developing into insanity in his schemes for recognition by the royal family, is kept before us, stimulates even a tired brain; and Harry's slow evolution from blind love and worship of his father to a perception of his real worthless, erratic and scoundrelly character shoots through the whole an intensely vivid and pathetic ray of light. A sort of indirect advocacy of republicanism is perhaps discernible in the book. The pretence of royalty caricatured in the representative of a bastard line; the disgrace and humiliation which it brought upon Harry; and his final reconciliation with Janet, as the true union between equals, seem to point in this direction.

But, on the other side, we have Ottilia, the German princess, sincerely loving and appreciating the hero, and representing in her own person the genuine royalty, which is of the heart and soul, while conventional royalty is a mere mask or husk. But this forms only a minor interest; hardly felt, as the book stands, until the very end. The main interest lies in the great, turbulent human drama which is exhibited: and of this the din and tumult swell to such a degree that, towards the close, one feels as if his brain were assailed by the harmonic din of one of Wagner's stupendous operas.

If Mr. Symons were right about 'Harry Richmond' then, indeed, would Mr. W. L. Courtney be curiously wrong, for he finds it cold, lacking in tenderness and 'heart,' and the voice of middle age speaking through it. Judge ye how immeasurably distant these characteristics are removed from the enchanting realm of romance! Thus Mr. Courtney in the *Fortnightly* of June, 1886:

Perhaps in no novel do we find the absence of joy more conspicuous than in 'Harry Richmond.' Here is a young man who goes through a series of surprising adventures quite removed from the sphere of probability. He is fallen in love with a German princess, and finds a lost father attitudinising as a bronze image on the top of a hill. The only literary excuse for such extravagances would be the rollicking character of the hero, such a one, for instance, as was endeared to our childhood by Captain Marryat or Kingston. But Harry Richmond does not rollick; he is never young, but talks about himself with the *maladie de la pensée* of a modern age.

The problem of harmonising the views of these three critics is one which I shall discreetly shun, but I may admit that my vote would most likely go to support Lathrop's opinion of 'Harry Richmond.' Mr. Arthur Symons's appreciation of 'Beauchamp's Career,' however, will almost certainly be applauded by most students of Meredith, though that is a novel on which there might reasonably be considerable divergence of opinion without any suspicion of injustice to the author. I quote from the note by Mr. Symons in *Time*, October, 1886:

Not one of Mr. Meredith's works impresses one with so keen a sense of absolute faithfulness to fact, to life, to human nature, and worldly circumstance. It cannot be called a political novel, in the sense of the term as applied to 'Coningsby,' for instance; but the political element is naturally very strong in a novel whose hero is a Radical candidate. Nevil Beauchamp, whose career, political and domestic, the story treats of, is one of the most admirably drawn of Mr. Meredith's heroes, and I think intrinsically the noblest in nature of them all. His strange, attractive character, with its fiery sincerity, its dashing and determined impulsiveness, its tenacity of will and temerity of purpose, is represented with spirit, but always sympathetic impartiality. The story of his career is saddening, in the contrast of so splendid a nature, and so small an appreciable result; such gifts for happiness and so troubled a life, so tragic a death. Yet the book is by no means a cheerless one; it has the comedy with the tragedy, the pleasantness with the sadness, of real life. . . . The greatness of the book lies in its effect as a whole, its breadth and fulness of outline, its vivid breadth of reality, its strength and grasp of the life around and the life within us.

Where Mr. Symons might possibly find some excellent critics to differ from him would be applying the epithet 'tragic' to the death of Beauchamp. Tragedy implies inevitableness, and many critics, like most ordinary readers, are inclined to think that the end of Beauchamp at the hands of his creator is more suggestive of the heartless gods, whose cold laughter is heard in the background, than of the doom which would be meted out by tragic art. Mr. W. C. Brownell, the brilliant American critic, as we might expect from what we already know of his point of view, is very emphatic as to Meredith keeping his personages in arbitrary control, and actually chooses Beauchamp as an example of how the author prevents us from 'warming to his personages.'

You are not allowed to (says Mr. Brownell). He banters you

out of it generally; even when such favourites of his own as Nevil Beauchamp are concerned, he is almost timorous lest your tenderness should be unintelligent. This is carried so far that one rarely cares much what becomes of these personages. You know in advance that they will never be the sport of any spontaneity. Their fate is sealed. They are the slaves of their creator's will, counters in his game. And this is why, in playing it, though he constantly challenges our admiration, he does not hold our interest. The air of free agency that he throws round them does not deceive us. We don't at all know what is to befall them, how they are going to act, but we have an ever-present sense that he does, and this sense is only sharpened by the knowledge, born of experience in reading his books, that he is going to make them surprise us. The induction he would have us make is, no doubt, that they are unaccountable, like human nature itself; but the one we make is that he it is who is unaccountable.

Perhaps the critic a little overstates his case here, for assuredly most of us have 'warmed' to Nevil Beauchamp, though we may be disposed to agree with Mr. Brownell that in the death of that true hero the novelist is 'unaccountable.' It is obviously meant to illustrate the slaps in the face which Fate loves to deal out to idealists, and it could be supported with any amount of evidence from real life. But so could any melodrama that ever ramped its hour upon the Surrey stage.

Whatever we may think of the end of Beauchamp, there can be no two opinions as to the eminence of the novel. Following the chronology of Meredith's works, 'Beauchamp's Career' shows the novelist unquestionably at the height of his power, 'Rhoda Fleming' alone among its predecessors ranking with it in the intense humanness and majestic sweep of the emotions. Lathrop is wholehearted in his admiration for this genuine masterpiece. He says:

The story is consummately real, and the conclusion, succinct though it be, is deeply touching. It is a thoroughly manly book, but the women in it are as remarkable and commendable for truth as the central man is. One must search a long time in the masterpieces of fiction for a woman so complex, so natural, so wonderfully portrayed, as Rosamund Culling, who loves Nevil Beauchamp with a mingling of mother's and sister's love, and watches over him constantly.

Mr. T. P. O'Connor has several times described 'Beauchamp's Career' as his favourite among the works of Meredith, and Mr. Justin McCarthy in his 'Reminiscences' makes a similar confession, when he writes:

I think that for my own part I admire 'Beauchamp's Career' more thoroughly from first to last than any other of Meredith's novels, although I do not want my readers to suppose for a moment that I have grown in any sense cold to the merits of 'Richard Feverel' and 'Evan Harrington'—I have a friend, himself distinguished in letters and in politics, who insists that 'Evan Harrington' contains the finest picture of a certain kind of woman yet given in fiction, and I only feel inclined to qualify his opinion by expressing a reluctance to go in too absolutely for the use of superlatives. But I find much in 'Beauchamp's Career' which seems to lift me higher in thought and in soul and in hope than any other of Meredith's novels has done; and I do not know where, in fiction, one can find love scenes more beautiful than those which are pictured in what I may call the Venetian pages of the story. For the full enjoyment of these pages they should be read in Venice, as George Sand's story 'La Dernière Aldini' ought to be, and as Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Transformation' ought to be read in Rome.

Intervening between the great achievement of his mid-career and the writing of 'The Egoist,' are the shorter stories 'The House on the Beach,' 'The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper,' and 'The Tale of Chloe,' the last especially ranking, in some respects, among his finest work in prose. These short stories have been but little criticised, and well-nigh twenty years had elapsed from their first appearance in the *New Quarterly Magazine* before they were reprinted in one volume together. In the *Scots Observer*, November 24, 1888, Mr. J. M. Barrie, in his own charming way, wrote, under the title of 'The Lost Works of George Meredith,' a plea for their republication, asking 'Are a hundred thousand words of a master's writings to perish of neglect? Although the magazine is dead, why should all its trophies be buried with it?' Well, they have now been available for fifteen years to all who care to read them, and it is to the credit of Mr. Barrie that when no other critic seemed to be troubling his head about these stories he at least urged the need to give them permanent form. He did not overstate the case when he said that 'these three stories have almost as much title to represent him as his longer tales.' Mr. Barrie then proceeded at some length to review the stories, and in his article there are certain passages which should be recorded here. Concerning 'The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper,' he writes:

Of these two delightfully contrasted characters it may be said,

as Mr. Meredith has himself written of Miss Austen's *Emma* and her lover, that they 'might walk straight into a comedy, were the plot arranged for them'; indeed there is scene after scene in the story which leaves the vivid impression of an acted play. Cut out the author's comments, and a comedy for the stage remains, though not probably a comedy with sufficient guffaw in it to command success.

Of 'The House on the Beach' Mr. Barrie remarks:

It contains one striking figure, a former shopkeeper who, like the immortal 'old Mel,' wants to be a gentleman. But, unlike the tailor, he would be a gentleman on the cheap. The closing scene is great. This hero has been 'presented.' He loves to don his court dress in private, and he has it on when he is rescued from a flood that ruins him. The contrast between the costume and the wearer's condition haunts the memory: otherwise this is the least important story of the three.

Mr. Barrie then describes in detail the plot of 'The Tale of Chloe,' remarking that the story presents 'a picture of the Wells as vivid as the pump-room scene in "Harry Richmond,"' and that in the death of Chloe 'the author strikes a real tragic note,' while 'Beau Beamish is a memorable comedy figure.' Meredith, he is persuaded, 'could not have treated Chloe had he not dug down to the very roots of human nature.'

We pass now to the most discussed of all Meredith's books, though certainly not his greatest, if judged strictly as a novel, which would be to judge it by a false standard. The author describes it as 'a comedy in narrative,' and Henley advises those who are not familiar with the function of comedy to study Molière's comedies before taking up 'The Egoist.' Meredith himself had thoughtfully published his illuminating lecture 'On the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit' while he was at work on 'The Egoist.' As this is now available in the complete edition a reading of it might profitably precede the study of 'The Egoist.'

Henley did more than any one man to awaken the public to the unique greatness of 'The Egoist.' Immediately on the appearance of the book in 1879 he wrote at least three characteristic reviews of it, the first in the *Athenæum*, November 1, another in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, November 3, and a third in the *Academy*, November 22. After which that tireless enthusiast for great literature, who praised as valiantly as he blamed, might feel he had not neglected his duty by 'The Egoist'! He saw with noon-day clear-

ness what Meredith's critics as a whole have perceived somewhat foggily: that 'The Egoist' must not be judged by the ordinary standard of prose fiction, since it is one of those rare creations of literature in which a great artist has performed the feat of expressing in terms of one art the spirit and purpose of another. Pure comedy is here embodied as a novel, through which the author 'pursues things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.' Henley in his various studies of the book displays his truly remarkable critical perceptiveness, by the notable freshness with which, in each essay, he deals with the same subject. He, naturally, has comparisons and likenesses to institute with the master of comedy, showing that while Meredith has achieved, in Sir Willoughby Patterne, a universal type that might almost rank with Tartuffe and Alceste, Meredith's style is at the opposite pole from that 'union of ease and strength, of purity and sufficiency, of austerity and charm' which we recognise as Molière's. In the first of the above-mentioned studies we find him writing:

In 'The Egoist' Mr. Meredith is even more artificial and affected than his wont: he bristles with allusions, he teems with hints and side-hits and false alarms, he glitters with phrases, he riots in intellectual points and philosophical fancies; and though his style does nowhere else become him so well, his cleverness is yet so reckless and indomitable as to be almost as fatiguing here as everywhere. But in their matter the great Frenchman and he have not much to envy each other. Sir Willoughby Patterne is a 'document on humanity' of the highest value; and to him that would know of egoism and the egoist the study of Sir Willoughby is indispensable. There is something in him of us all. He is a compendium of the Personal in man; and if in him the abstract Egoist have not taken on his final shape and become classic and typical it is not that Mr. Meredith has forgotten anything in his composition but rather that there are certain defects of form, certain structural faults and weaknesses, which prevent you from accepting as conclusive the aspect of the mass of him. But the Molière of the future (if the future be that fortunate) has but to pick and choose with discretion here to find the stuff of a companion figure to Arnolphe and Alceste and Célimène.

There is a passage in the third of Henley's essays on 'The Egoist,' written for the *Academy*, which I wish to quote on account of its personal note, though it will be seen that with a writer like Henley, in whom the critical faculty was so eminently developed, the expression of a merely 'personal' opinion was hardly possible

and his last word was, as usual with him, a lament for those defects of literary form which he deemed the result of an abnormal cleverness :

Speaking for myself, I have read 'The Egoist' with great and ever-increasing interest and admiration. To me it is certainly one of the ablest books of modern years. It is full of passion and insight, of wit and force, of truth and eloquence and nature. Its characters, from Sir Willoughby downwards, are brilliantly right and sound; it has throughout the perfect good-breeding of high comedy; there is not a sentence in it, whether of dialogue or analysis, or reflection, but is in some sort matter for applause. All the same, I cannot but believe that its peculiarities of form are such as must stand inevitably in the way of its success. I cannot but believe that, with all its astonishing merits, it will present itself to its warmest admirers as a failure in art, as art has hitherto been understood and practised. Mr. Meredith has written for himself, and it is odds but the multitude will decline to listen to him. Nor, so far as I can see, is the multitude alone to blame.

If Henley was liable to find the critic in him subjecting the man in all expressions of artistic enjoyment, with R. L. Stevenson it was the reverse, for there at times we see the tastes and affections of the man prevailing over the instincts of the critic. His opinions of 'The Egoist' certainly are purely personal and informed with none of that critical discretion which is everywhere present in the judgments of Henley, to whom he addressed this oft-quoted letter in April, 1882 :

My dear Henley, . . . Talking of Meredith, I have just re-read for the third and fourth time 'The Egoist.' When I shall have read it the six or seventh, I begin to see I shall know about it. You will be astonished when you come to re-read it; I had no idea of the matter—human red matter—he has contrived to plug and pack into that strange and admirable book. Willoughby is, of course, a pure discovery; a complete set of nerves, not heretofore examined, and yet running all over the human body—a suit of nerves. Clara is the best girl I ever saw anywhere. Vernon is almost as good. The manner and faults of the book greatly justify themselves on further study. Only Dr. Middleton does not hang together; and Ladies Busshe and Culmer *sont des monstruosités*. Vernon's conduct makes a wonderful odd contrast with Daniel Deronda's. I see more and more that Meredith is built for immortality. . . .

I am yours loquaciously,  
R. L. S.

Five years later Stevenson wrote in the *British Weekly*, May 13,



1887, an article on 'Books which have Influenced Me,' now reprinted in 'The Art of Writing,' wherein occurs this memorable passage on 'The Egoist':

I should never forgive myself if I forgot 'The Egoist.' It is art, if you like, but it belongs purely to didactic art, and from all the novels I have read (and I have read thousands) stands in a place by itself. Here is a Nathan for the modern David; here is a book to send the blood into men's faces. Satire, the angry picture of human faults, is not great art; we can all be angry with our neighbour; what we want is to be shown, not his defects, of which we are too conscious, but his merits, to which we are too blind. And 'The Egoist' is a satire; so much must be allowed; but it is a satire of a singular quality, which tells you nothing of that obvious mote, which is engaged from first to last with that invisible beam. It is yourself that is hunted down; these are your faults that are dragged into the day and numbered, with lingering relish, with cruel cunning and precision. A young friend of Mr. Meredith's (as I have the story) came to him in an agony. 'This is too bad of you,' he cried. 'Willoughby is me!' 'No, my dear fellow,' said the author; 'he is all of us.' I have read 'The Egoist' five or six times myself, and I mean to read it again; for I am like the young friend of the anecdote—I think Willoughby an unmanly but a very serviceable exposure of myself.

The critics have not greatly concerned themselves with 'The Tragic Comedians,' being here at one with the reading public. Little has been written of this short and little-read novel. And that little is chiefly by way of adverse criticism. Even Henley had here to confess himself out of touch with the master who sought to give a fictive setting to the fantastic love-story of Lassalle and Helena von Doënniges, for he writes thus in 'Views and Reviews':

Opinions differ, and there are those, I believe, to whom Alvan and Clotilde von Rüdiger—'acrobats of the affections' they have been called—are pleasant companions, and the story of those feats in the gymnastics of sentimentalism in which they lived to shine is the prettiest reading imaginable. But others not so fortunate, or, to be plain, more honestly obtuse, persist in finding that story tedious, and the bewildering appearances it deals with, not human beings—not of the stock of Rose Jocelyn and Sir Everard Romfrey, of Dahlia Fleming and Lucy Feverel and Richmond Roy—but creatures of gossamer and rainbow, phantasms of spiritual romance, abstractions of remote, dispiriting points in sexual philosophy.

Mr. W. L. Courtney, in the *Fortnightly*, was even more emphatic; but it is curious to note how a book that leaves one critic



DR. ALVAN  
(FERDINAND TASSALLI)

The unhappy love story of the famous Jewish leader of German Liberalism and Helene von Drömmgen is the theme of 'The Italian Comedians' where Tassalli figures as Dr. Alvan.



utterly untouched may capture another and send him breathless to the reading of all the works from the same pen. So much did 'The Tragic Comedians' for Professor MacCallum of Sydney, as we gather from his admirable lecture on Meredith published in 1892:

About nine years ago some old college friends were discussing the relation of the will to the passions and the reason, when one of them quoted a phrase about 'that wandering ship of the drunken pilot, the mutinous crew and the angry captain, called Human Nature.' That was my first introduction to George Meredith; before then I only knew his name as the butt of reviewing wit, and had held myself exempt from the need of closer acquaintance with him as with any other luckless novelist of the hour. But the words quoted were unlike those of a third-rate novel; they suggested a writer who would at least be worth looking into. It was not easy, however, to do even this much, the only one of his works that could readily be got was 'The Tragic Comedians,' from which the quotation came, and I well remember the feeling of bewilderment as I read the opening chapters. No other novelist wrote like that, no characters in fiction talked like that, the story seemed the most wild and absurd extravaganza, yet with bright rifts in it through which the sun of genius flashed. Meanwhile a sketch of Lassalle's career, which was not then, as now, prefixed to the volume [This refers to Ward Lock's edition of 1892, in which Mr. Clement Shorter wrote a note on Lassalle], fell into my hands, and my astonishment was increased by the discovery that the story was almost literally true, the most extraordinary remarks had actually been made. I went back to the novel to find the style not tumid and stilted, as it seemed on the first unintelligent perusal, but aglow with passion and thought, the action set forth, the characters interpreted with a grand poetic power; from that reading I emerged a student of Meredith for life, resolved to make the rest of his works my own.

There has certainly been no lack of commentary on 'Diana of the Crossways,' but, chiefly, it is to be noted, relative to the character of the heroine, and not to the novel as a whole. The first noteworthy review of the book appeared in the *Academy*, February 28, 1885, and was from the pen of the late James Ashcroft Noble. In the course of his critique he wrote:

The author of 'Diana of the Crossways' has always seemed to us not so much a novel-writer as a singularly brilliant social essayist, who has wilfully chosen to cut up his essays into fragments of fictitious description and conversation. His books are always interesting, and yet, paradoxical as the saying may seem, we are interested neither in the personages themselves nor in what happens to

them. We read simply that we may know what Mr. Meredith has to say, and that we may enjoy his manner of saying it. . . . There is nothing better in 'Diana of the Crossways' than the almost dazzlingly brilliant introductory chapter; and here Mr. Meredith is what we contend he ought always to be, an essayist undisguised in the fancy dress of a novel-writer. . . . The situations in the book are not inevitable. They have no imaginative necessity, but only an intellectual necessity. They are simply pegs on which to hang clever comments. We do not, we cannot, really care for Diana Warwick and her various entanglements with her lovers and would-be lovers; but it is interesting to see what Mr. Meredith can make of them. Once, indeed, Diana ~~does~~ become vividly human—in the scene where Percy Dacier casts her off because she has betrayed his great political secret to the London editor; but the chapter comes as a surprise, and it is a surprise that does not recur.

On the other hand, W. E. Henley, who wrote a long criticism of the book in the *Athenæum*, March 14, 1885, formed a very different opinion of the novel, beginning by saying that 'in "Diana of the Crossways" Mr. Meredith has atoned for the faults of "The Tragic Comedians."'

To our thinking (he declares), 'Diana of the Crossways' is one of the best of all Mr. Meredith's books. It has no touch of the tremendous spiritual tragedy which forms the subject of 'Rhoda Fleming'—in some ways the greatest of its author's achievements; nor, on the other hand, is its essence so peculiar and rare as that spirit of comedy whose expression in Sir Willoughby Patterne sets 'The Egoist' on a pinnacle apart among novels, and marks the writer for one of the breed of Shakespeare and Molière. It keeps a mean between the two extremes, it has affinities with both, and copies neither. It is a study of character, and it is also a study of emotion; it is a picture of fact and the world, and it is touched with generous romance; it is rich in kindly comedy, and it abounds in natural passion; it sets forth a selection of many human elements, and is joyful and sorrowful, wholesome with laughter and fruitful of tears, as life itself. In one word, it is a common novel, as 'Amelia' is, and 'Vanity Fair.' It ends as happily as the feeblest and flimsiest of visions in three volumes, and is only distinguished from the ruck of its contemporaries in being the work of a man of genius and a great artist.

Parsons Lathrop, who was also eloquent in praise of the novel, found in it qualities which, had they been present in other works of the same master-hand, would have made for popularity. He writes thus in the *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1888:

In 'Diana of the Crossways' he has attempted, with partial success, to do something different from his usual line. He has, in fact, attempted to make himself popular. As a consequence, the book has, I believe, made better headway with the public than any of its predecessors; and yet there could hardly be a more convincing proof of the futility of the effort made by the author to render himself popular than that which is supplied by this production. He has chosen a pure, beautiful, gifted, and dazzlingly brilliant woman as his heroine; he has put her through a severe matrimonial, amatory, and emotional experience, and matched her at last with a strong, patient, sturdy, yet sensitive type of man who is quite worthy of her. He titillates the impure appetite of readers by introducing scandal and divorce proceedings. It may be that these elements have served to give the novel an impetus; but they do not make it genuinely popular. His way of telling the story is, in the main, as excellent as he knows how to fashion it—direct, dramatic, vivacious.

'And now a wonder comes to light, to show'—well, we'll let it go at that, but if one cared to press the case for criticism, it could be amply proved by the way in which the three remaining novels were received, and the lines from Goldsmith might be completed not without reason. I shall content myself by affirming that 'Shagpat,' 'Feverel' and all the intervening novels, with the possible exception of 'Rhoda Fleming,' were more enthusiastically received by the critics than 'One of Our Conquerors,' 'Lord Ormont and his Aminta' and 'The Amazing Marriage.' Yet we are told that only within the last twenty years of his life were Meredith's works adequately criticised. There can be few who have studied the criticism of Meredith so closely as I have, and I take off my hat to the critics, known and unknown, who handled his books before 1880: some of the soundest criticism ever written on contemporary fiction was enjoyed by Meredith long before that date. Let it be urged, if you will, that his last three novels were not sufficiently trumpeted; but that is the fault of those who are so prone to chide the critics of an earlier day for lack of perception.

We owe to Miss Harriet Waters Preston, the charming American essayist, the credit of a unique thing in Meredith criticism: the discovery that the last three novels are a 'great trilogy.' On the whole, I think, she makes out an excellent case, and her closely reasoned study of Meredith, under the title of 'A Knightly Pen,' contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1902, is a most valuable addition to the criticism of the novels. Her contention is that in these three works the novelist has said his last word in the rôle of

'a gallant champion of what are, to him, the sacred and inviolable Rights of Woman.' It will be said at once that in this sense all his novels are in harmony, and one will ask: What of 'Diana'? What of 'Rhoda Fleming'? But Miss Preston is no doubt right in her view that while the theme 'would seem to have haunted the novelist at intervals from youth up,' the searching and sustained discussion of it in the last three gives it and them a special significance. After sketching out the plot of 'One of our Conquerors' very vividly, Miss Preston goes on to say:

'Here's a sermon, Harry!' as the old Baroness Bernstein said to her Virginian kinsman, when he failed to recognise her own resplendent portrait as a girl. But there are subsidiary themes and incidental homilies in this extremely serious book which are hardly less impressive. There is the flaw, detected and exposed, of lurking vulgarity in the ideal of life accepted by every man who will be first and foremost a money king. There is the quaint idyl of Victor Radnor's confidential clerk, the converted pugilist, who consecrates his formidable fist to God and the intrepid Salvation lass whom he had rescued from the violence of a drunken brute. Above all, there is the effect of the long tragedy, they have seen so near, upon those fair-minded men of the world who have the run of Victor's house. Theoretically, of course, and in the face of that world, they stand by their own order and its Mohammedan traditions. But the 'pity and terror' of it all purify their feeling both for mother and daughter in degrees that vary exactly with the native nobility of each man's mind. The titled fiancée, so needful to the success of Victor's political plans, whom Nesta had dutifully accepted at her father's eager instance, but to her mother's unspoken distress, draws back naturally enough from the revelation that the mother is impelled to make, and half accepts the release which the girl instantly offers him when she herself is told the truth. Afterwards he repents, and would risk and condone all, but it is too late. In the forcing fire of that sharp crisis, the virginal soul of his bride that might have been has risen above and passed far away from him. If ever young woman 'grew upon the sunny side of the wall,' it was Nesta up to the time when she learned the truth about her parentage. And yet—*paratum est cor suum*—the divine preparation of the heart had been surely going on. And when the maiden of nineteen springs to mortal maturity in one fierce hour, we know not which to admire more—her arrowy rectitude, or her ample charity. Love answereth all things. She loves, encourages, and supports her mother. She loves, compassionates, and nerves her father. She never judges either. She seems not even to know how firmly she holds in her slender hand the balance between these two beloved beings of whose error she was born. In her large, fresh,

and thoroughly illuminated inner being there is no room even for righteous scorn. And no more is there any hesitation or fear. Henceforth hers is a steady and undaunted championship of all women under a social cloud; both the actually 'fallen' and those like to fall; a championship whose Christ-like frankness comes near to appalling, at times, even the most generous of her own devoted followers among men. The author's divination of the probable workings of a brave, blameless, and clairvoyant woman's heart seems at this point little less than dæmonic.

Following her admirable appreciation of the story of 'One of Our Conquerors,' the style of which she criticises severely, Miss Preston turns to the second work of her trilogy:

The story of 'Lord Ormont and his Aminta' is briefer, and much more plainly, not to say bluntly told. . . . Upon the rebels, in this instance, Mr. Meredith pronounces no formal sentence. By implication he may almost be regarded as justifying them, for it is Lord Ormont and his kind against whom he trains the tremendous artillery of his moral. That valiant old soldier had, after all, so sound a heart, and so keen a faculty of discernment, except when swayed by petty personal spite! He thoroughly appreciated, nay, doted on the infinite possibilities of the rare young creature whom, still, the selfish custom of his sex and the indurated cruelty of his caste permitted him to abuse, as toy or instrument, until he had fairly driven her to insurrection and constructive crime. He had intended to right her so magnificently when it should be his own good time and royal pleasure to do so! He would deck her with the world-renowned family diamonds, and trample upon the whole impudent and ungrateful peerage in drawing her to his side. But when he finally turned and signified his gracious willingness to adjust her coronet, the youthful countess was gone.

Miss Preston is particularly keen in her praise of the Lady Charlotte, and doubts if any one except Shakespeare has ever so portrayed, 'to the inmost palpitating life, the rude, imperious, and at the same time intensely human and convincing character' which Meredith has drawn in Lady Charlotte Eglett. She next goes on to describe 'The Amazing Marriage' as a retelling of 'Lord Ormont and his Aminta' with altered characters and conditions, suggesting that this was done by the novelist to vindicate absolutely and conclusively his heroine. But to say that 'The Amazing Marriage' is only another version of the story of Lord and Lady Ormont is not, however, to suggest, for one moment, that the author repeats himself. Quite otherwise. He is indeed so affluent a creator of



human types and combinations that the identity of the twice-told parable is not immediately apparent to the reader.

On the whole Miss Preston makes out a fairly convincing case for the relationship of the last three novels, in which Meredith advances the flag of Femininism even more vigorously and with greater *élan* than in any of his earlier works. But this we must consider further in the next chapter. Here we may profitably note another characteristic of his work which has seldom attracted the attention of his expositors, and, so far as I am aware, has been dwelt upon only by an able writer ('G.-Y.') in the *Bookman* of August, 1894, who contributed a study of 'Lord Ormont and his Aminta' from which I select the following :

'Lord Ormont and his Aminta' compels an inquiry into the nationality of Mr. Meredith's mind—though it gives no very definite answer. Read in one light, the book is a glorification of English boys, English school-boy honour, English pluck and daring, an eloquent tolerance of, an artistic esteem for, English defects. This kind of sentiment used to be embodied in stories by Mr. Thomas Hughes. Now-a-days an excellent interpreter of the Anglo-Saxon temper in its tougher moods has been found in Mr. Rudyard Kipling. (Was Mr. Meredith ever brought into such incongruous company?—but the incongruity is just the point.) They take English superiority for granted calmly, or hoist the flag aggressively, ignore the faults they do not wish to see, or berate their country soundly for others, and mainly for not being English enough. Mr. Meredith's lyrical enthusiasm for his country, and his intellectual enjoyment of her limitations, are something entirely different. With his cosmopolitan sympathies, his personal freedom from insular prejudices, he is exactly the type of man you expect to look on John Bull as a barbarian, and hold all Philistines in horror as unclean, or not conversible with fellow-citizens. But he does nothing of the kind. In the first place, perhaps, he has too much humour, but, secondly, he comes with such fresh, untired eyes to look at the Philistines that he finds them most amusing fellows, and thereupon sits down, not to laugh at them, but to describe their points of view till you are persuaded he is bringing you into a company of distinction. He is like a foreigner turned Anglophile, and there is nothing sincerer and heartier than the admiration of such. Just as the descendants of the English of the pale became more Irish than the Irish, so Mr. Meredith, with a mind that one does not at all recognise as native, is in certain moods more British than the British. I am not going to try and put a label on the nationality of his mind; perhaps there is no nationality ready to admit it on the score of very near kinship. But it is something swifter than English, and not only more agile, but more delighting

in agility; not more emotional or imaginative, but with a keener intellectual sense of the value of emotions and of the part imagination plays in ordinary life.

In the correspondence of York Powell, that ardent Meredithian, Professor Oliver Elton, quotes a letter, dated February 10, 1896, addressed to him, wherein Powell is hot in praise of the master's last novel, saying: 'I am sure this "A.M." will be one of the solid bases of M.'s fame. He has given time to it, I know, as well as inspiration. It is not "difficult." It is profoundly interesting.'

If one might now venture to give a general impression of the criticisms we have been discussing, that would shape itself broadly in these terms: The novels of Meredith, though lacking in construction, often crudely fashioned and at times tending to the melodramatic, are so rich in the variety, truth and freshness of their characters, that where they fail as stories they triumph abundantly as revelations of human life. That the art of the storyteller is at the command of the novelist, when he has chosen to curb his 'overmastering cleverness,' such a masterpiece of tragic drama as 'Rhoda Fleming' proves as completely as 'Sandra Belloni' illustrates his proneness to prolixity and the inconsequent.

While there is no feature of our social life into which the novelist has not looked with seeing eyes and studied profoundly, his sympathies are ever with the intellectuals; he moves uneasily among the lowly and the humble, where Dickens was at home, and seldom attempts the interpretation of common folk, whose hearts are more fruitful of study than their brains, without leaving the impression that he has tried to follow Dickens and failed.

That his characters talk as none we have known in life have ever talked—unless, indeed, it be Meredith himself—is a common and a thoughtless complaint; since their language is not that of ordinary fiction any more than the blank verse of Shakespeare's plays is that of ordinary speech, and is not to be criticised by common standards. This is original with him and germane to his method, which, failing sometimes, succeeds brilliantly and so often that all its failures are discounted. Here emphatically he has created the taste by which he must be judged and comparative criticism cannot be applied.

His attitude to life and to the personages of his novels is that of a keen-witted observer, seldom that of an emotionally warm and sympathetic friend; hence the feeling of aloofness which, barring

the way to close intimacy of the heart, leaves open the road to intellectual admiration and communion.

An epic largeness of design is noted in most of his great novels without an equal largeness of achievement; but the mark being high and the aim likewise, the falling short still leaves the achievement immensely greater than the successful efforts of lesser and often more widely read contemporaries.

Above all is the remarkable allegiance to femininism, leaving the impression that in the novelist's own character there is a feminine strain, of which he is conscious and proudly so, as when he makes Alvan say: 'You meet now and then men who have the woman in them without being womanised; they are the pick of men. And the choicest women are those who yield not a feather of their womanliness for some amount of manlike strength.' The attributing of this sentiment to the author rather than to his personage, irregular as criticism in ordinary, is here legitimate, as it illustrates a further characteristic of this novelist: often his characters are uttering not their own thoughts, but their author's; too often to admit of his possessing 'absolute dramatic vision.'

Finally, his long series of novels is unique in our literature, and with all their faults of construction and style these works contain such a harvest of philosophy and humour as no other novelist of the Victorian era has garnered.



[Fleming] [Martin] [Belloni] [Feyerherd]

#### MILFORD AND SOME OF HIS FAMOUS CREATIONS

The characters in this picture from left to right are (above) Emma in "Sally Belloni", (below) Robert Fleming and her father Robert Harrington and Ros. J. Selwyn (above) Aminta in "Lord Ormont and his Aminta" (below) Lucy in "Richard Feyerherd" Diana of the Crossways and below on the extreme right Clara Millette, the dainty regent in "The Regent of the East".



## X

### HIS HEROINES AND WOMEN-FOLK

'YOUR knowledge of women is almost indecent,' a celebrated lady novelist—of whose novels the same is partly true—once remarked to George Meredith. It was a flash of that Dianaësqe wit which Meredith has done not a little to encourage, with results not always of the happiest. But it states a truism with the legitimate exaggeration of epigram. Since the little printer of Salisbury Square enchained the whole feminine world of his time with his 'Pamela' and his 'Clarissa,' no other novelist has rivalled Meredith in the appeal to femininity, though there is no striking likeness between them. Richardson most faithfully interpreted the contemporary feminine character; Meredith has sought to breathe into woman a larger life; to claim for her qualities that are not typical; to prove, above all, that she is not dominated by sex, but is as individual as man. Hence his women-folk are unique in literature, and perhaps in life. To him in particular is due the claim so strenuously urged by the modern 'advanced' woman, to be considered not as an atom of woman, but as an individual. The woman suffrage movement became in some sort his Frankenstein; and he had to condemn that propaganda of sex—which proves with ludicrous perversity the opposite of his contention—as unwise and disastrous. Unwomanly we cannot call it; since, with the uprising of the feminine 'individual,' the virtues once dubbed 'womanly' must now receive some other definition. That Meredith's ideal of womanhood carries us millenniumward is by no means the general opinion, though his insight into the mind of women—rather than of woman—is unexampled. In March, 1905, he wrote as follows to Mr. Hugh W. Strong, of Newcastle-on-Tyne:

Since I began to reflect I have been impressed by the injustice done to women, the constraint put upon their natural aptitudes and faculties, generally much to the degradation of the race. I have not studied them more closely than I have men, but with more

affection, a deeper interest in their enfranchisement and development, being assured that women of the independent mind are needed for any sensible degree of progress. They will so educate their daughters that these will not be instructed at the start to feel themselves naturally inferior to men because less muscular, and need not have recourse to practise arts, feline chiefly, to make their way in the world.

In the same letter the novelist stated that he had no special choice among the women of his books, saying 'perhaps I gave more colour to Diana of the Crossways and Clara Middleton of "The Egoist," and this on account of their position.'

A French lady-writer, Mademoiselle Henriette Cordelet, whose study of 'La Femme dans l'Œuvre de Meredith' will call for mention later, observes that of all the problems in life that interest the novelist the chief is 'the battle of the sexes.' This is true, and because of its truth we shall find that even the male characters of his novels are interesting largely on account of the sex relationship. It is man in relation to woman, and seldom man to man with which Meredith engages us. Sir Willoughby Patterne is negatively a study of feminism, so too Sir Austin Feverel—take Lucy away and what would be left of his 'system'? She was conceived at the moment of its birth, to condition everything. Beauchamp, also, though containing possibilities of existence apart from the influence of woman, is in the end dominated by the eternally feminine, and Victor Radnor most of all. Take all the novels that bear a masculine name; woman is as eminent in them as she is in those to which the names of the heroines are given.) Assuredly his countrywomen ought to be his warmest partisans, for no other novelist has sought with such meticulous care to avoid presenting in all his legion of women characters a conventional figure based upon the 'veiled virginal doll' of the writers of popular fiction. In his resolution to give to every feminine figure an individuality, he has, perhaps, endowed some of them more richly than nature warrants. The general result is to produce that impression of tense femininity to which reference has already been made.

Is it possible that a novelist who sees more in woman than she can see in herself fails of that widest reading public for fiction simply because he is to her—as his own Mrs. Berry puts it—'like somethin' out o' nature'? That is a question involving a long and debatable answer, which can scarcely be attempted here. In his 'Life' of Browning, the late William Sharp has a reference to

Meredith's insight into feminine character that is worthy of note. He writes :

Only two writers of our age have depicted women with that imaginative insight which is at once more comprehensive and more illuminative than women's own invision of themselves—Robert Browning and George Meredith, but not even the latter, most subtle and delicate of all analysts of the tragi-comedy of human life, has surpassed 'Pompilia.' The meeting and the swift uprising of love between Lucy and Richard, in 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' is, it is true, within the highest reach of prose romance : but between even the loftiest height of prose romance and the altitudes of poetry there is an impassable gulf.

Professor Oliver Elton, too, writes wisely on this aspect of Meredith's fiction, but argues that man is the better painter of woman, without suggesting the possibility of man himself having something of the feminine in him, which, plus his manhood, enables him to see with clearer vision—to wed instinct with reason, so to say—into the dimmer recesses of women's nature. In his brilliant study of Meredith, appearing in 'Modern Studies,' Professor Elton writes :

He seems to have 'reversed the order of Paradise,' and to have created his woman first, and so to have had less clay at disposal for fashioning their mates. Renée, Emilia, Carinthia, Lucy, with their musical names—in their talk, and his talk about them, his style is at its purest and clearest, and the colours of the portraits are unfading. Women are nearer to nature than men, and the power to paint them can only come straight from the breast of nature—from experience lived through and transmuted into artistic form. Indeed, the business of 'reading the female heart' has not often been practised in English prose without a dispiriting effect. The tradition of unreality is old and obstinate. It runs far back to the Renaissance romance, like Sidney's 'Arcadia'—where, indeed, there is one tragic feminine figure, the queen Gynecia; and to the long-winded books in French and English consumed by our seventeenth-century ancestresses. But those old romances were apt to be made by courtly, artificial men or by spinsters without any profitable experience of humanity. One of these, Samuel Richardson, succeeded once, despite his fussy morals and clammy rhetoric. The laborious knife of George Eliot sometimes bites deep. But a man, if only he is great enough and can rise above the natural barrier ('*La haine entre les deux sexes*,' says Joubert, '*ne s'éteint guère*'), is the best and kindest painter of women and of their ailments of the soul, and the best describer of them. Or so the event seems to have proved. This is not a reflection upon women; for, after



all, it is better to belong to the class that is pictured than to the class that paints pictures.

(Balzac and Mr. Meredith, diverse in almost all ways, have both left behind them a portrait gallery of actual and living women. Balzac exceeds with older, harder, and stranger natures. The Englishman, more of a poet at the heart, prefers to celebrate youth and beauty that are victorious after long inward and outward trial.)

Mr. W. C. Brownell goes much deeper in his examination of this same subject. He points out what most writers are apt to ignore, if indeed they have noticed it: the paradoxical result of Meredith's treatment of women. And he explains the paradox very satisfactorily. While the whole force of the novelist's propaganda is to individualise women with men, yet he fights for 'the sex,' which implies the ancient attitude of those who have not yet doubled Cape Turk! Mr. Brownell's views are thus set forth in his 'Victorian Prose Masters':

A considerable part of Mr. Meredith's vogue is probably due to his treatment of women, which is very special, and for that reason, no doubt, has especially won the suffrages of 'the sex,' as he is fond of calling it. The approbateness of 'the sex' at its present stage of evolution is perhaps manifested quite as much with reference to evaluation and appreciation as a sex as it is individually. It can hardly have escaped observers of such phenomena that it is as a sex that, currently, women particularly appreciate being treated as individuals. The more marked such treatment is, the more justice they feel is done to the sex. Mr. Meredith's treatment of them is in this respect very marked—so much so, in fact, that he obliterates very often the broad distinction usually made between the young girl and the married woman. Diana, for example, leaves—in some respects—a maidenly, and some of his maidens produce a matronly, impression. With his women readers he has accordingly been, perhaps, particularly successful. He makes it unmistakably clear that women are psychologically worth while, complex, intricate, and multifarious in mind as well as complicated in nature. He makes a point of this, and underscores it in a way that produces a certain effect of novelty by the stress he lays on it. The justice so fully rendered is given the fillip of seeming tardy justice, and therefore an element of Mr. Meredith's originality among writers of fiction. This is a good deal, but I think it is witness of a still greater originality in him that he goes still further. He lays even greater stress upon the fact that the being thus intricately interesting and worthy of scrutiny from the constitution of her individual personality is also that most interesting of all personalities, a feminine one. He adds the requisite touch of chivalry. He is, after



# THE CUNNING OF SATAN

I le es a fa l or all I sit long s er as i fire i at sh always st l  
 ar lat lat cl le in I rst at me af r l r k ra ucl th lo l f  
 the fieri

II Chapl XIX



all, a true *aficionado* of 'the sex.' He can be trusted to understand, not to be too literal, not to forget that the singularisation implied in apotheosis is a very different thing from that involved in limitation. Women are to be discriminated as individuals, like men, but the fact that they possess in common and as women a certain distinctive quality is, above all, not to be lost sight of. This is the permanent, the *ewig*, fact about them. Only it is to be taken as a crown, not as a mere label.

So far we have listened to judgments of men in a matter where woman have surely a right to be heard, and before proceeding to look at certain of Meredith's female characters in some detail we cannot do better than discover what his women critics have had to say on the subject of his heroines and women-folk. Here one turns naturally to the first lady-writer of note who has dealt with Meredith's work as a whole; George Eliot having reviewed only his two earliest prose fictions. Miss Flora L. Shaw (*Lady Lugard*), in her noteworthy study (*New Princeton Review*, March, 1887) gave less attention than one might have expected to the feminism of Meredith, deeming it a subject whose consideration would have led her beyond the scope of a single review article. But what she did write was suggestive and to the point. She said:

The most striking feature of his presentation of women is the frankness with which he takes them on their merits. He surrounds them with no halo, he wraps them in no mystery, but, approaching them as simply as he approaches man, he lays the strength and the weakness open before us.

The embryonic condition of their reasoning powers, the reliance on the senses, which long process of evolution has made almost instinctive to them, are facts which he very honestly calls on them to recognise and remedy. He entirely refuses the doubtful form of homage which consists in putting them on a plane other than that of the understanding, but no living writer of English has done higher honour to the qualities which they possess. The friendship of Emma and Tony, in 'Diana of the Crossways,' is one among many instances. His gallery of heroines speak for themselves. Lucy, Emilia, Rose, Jenny, Diana, Emma, imperfect every one, still send us seeking for comparison to Shakespeare. And Renée, graceful Renée, cannot, for all her faultiness, be omitted. . . .

Humanity is not passing as an ironic procession before eyes which have rested comprehendingly on these bright figures. The difficult task of their creator has been to show that feeling, however sweet and good, is insufficient. If immeasurable love were perfect wisdom, one human being might almost impersonate Providence to another. Alas! love, divine as it is, can do no more than lighten

the house it inhabits—must take its shape, sometimes intensify its narrowness; can spiritualise, but not expel, old life-long lodgers above stairs and below.

The late Miss Adeline Sergeant who, in her time, had some vogue as a novelist, essentially of the conventional school, contributed anonymously to *Temple Bar*, June, 1889, an article on 'George Meredith's Views of Women,' which proved her a sound thinker and independent of mind, though her conclusions differed widely from Meredith's. Her right to speak for the women of her time gives some value to her opinions, which might be profitably circulated in these days of feminine agitation. Miss Sergeant entirely applauded Meredith's interpretation of woman's character and his opinion of woman's present position in society, but she dissented as strongly from his ideal of the future woman and his views of her functions.

He aims high, but not high enough. He does, indeed, set before us the hope that we may in time arrive at a true conception of the right heroic woman to be worshipped; and, if you prove to be of some spiritual stature, he says, you may reach to an ideal of the heroic feminine type for the worship of mankind; an image as yet in poetic outline only on our upper skies. But what, on analysis, is this heroic feminine type? Its progenitor seems to hold the view that the natures of women have been differentiated from those of men simply through man's agency, by man's tyranny and oppression acting on woman's physical weakness; that woman's highest aim is to reinstate herself by his side, to become his equal — 'the mate of man, and the mother of a nobler race'; and that she may some day attain to this proud position of likeness and equality, but only by man's aid and man's consent. If this be Meredith's theory, it seems to me to be founded on a wrong view of the physical nature, the mental weaknesses, and the moral capacities of both women and men.

There is scarcely a woman in his books who is not, righteously and grandly, in revolt, at war with herself, or with society; at war with the ignorance, the cowardice, the want of candour, want of judgment, want of sense, which a bad education, rather than a bad disposition, has made characteristic of woman; at war with society for its narrowness, its harshness, its want of humour and tolerance, and its impenetrable stupidity. With these the best among us are constantly at war; and we owe thanks to George Meredith for his pictures of women nobly at odds with themselves and with the world.

The gist of the whole matter, as regards these objections to Meredith's views of women, lies in his failure to discern the ever-



[Illustration of Misses' Boat  
from 'A Quiet Life']

[Illustration of the boat by Charles  
Knox in 'Once a Week']

#### EVAN AND ROSE ON BOARD THE 'JOCASTA'

One, a young lady, very young, in manner, wore a black felt hat, with a floating scarlet feather, and was clad about the shoulders in a mantle of foreign style and pattern. The other you might have taken for a wandering Don; were such an object ever known, so simply he assumed the dusky sombrero and little dangling cloak of which one fold was flung across his breast and drooped behind him.

[From 'Houghton' Chapter IV]



lasting differences between the natures of women and men. A careful examination of his books, and particularly of 'Diana of the Crossways' and 'The Egoist,' tends to convince me that he thinks of woman as of a lesser man, unfairly treated because she is not judged according to the standard applied to man, nor allowed his liberty of action and thought. I grant the unfairness of this kind of treatment, but not the reason given for it. Under no circumstances will women ever be the mates of men in the sense which Meredith attaches to the words. A woman's physical constitution alone disables her from becoming what is usually called 'the equal' of man. But the words 'equal,' 'superior,' or 'inferior,' are utterly out of place when used of creatures so different in capacity and temperament. The same laws and the same moralities will never fit the two. George Meredith forgets that where there are root-differences of physical constitution there are also sure to be root-differences of mind and temper. To grant the first and deny the second is to involve ourselves in endless difficulties; no amount of intellectual training will obliterate these distinctions of sex; and as, by the operations of unchanging law, higher organisation tends towards the differentiation of species, we shall more closely follow nature's lead if we emphasise rather than seek to lessen the differences between women and men.

Miss Harriet Waters Preston stresses his demand for courage in women with many an apt illustration, but she finds his ideal of womanhood, instead of being a new conception and in advance of his age, to be taken from the thirteenth century and the age of chivalry. 'The oddest feature of Mr. Meredith's crusade,' she writes, 'is this':

The emancipation which he invokes for the suffering fair is in no sense an intellectual one. It is anything and everything rather than an affair of sciences, languages, courses, and careers. And still less is it what is quaintly called by a certain class of agitators 'economic.' It is purely moral, and can be achieved only through the moral regeneration of woman's natural master. A champion of Woman's Rights—even with capitals—Mr. Meredith stands confessed; yet with the clearly defined proviso that a woman has no rights, under the present dispensation, save such as may accrue to her through the righteousness of man. No other author ever gauged so accurately all that a high-spirited woman feels, as none, surely, ever exposed so relentlessly the dastard quality that may shelter itself within the clanging armour of your imposing masculine bravo. Nevertheless Mr. Meredith takes his text quite frankly from 'Paradise Lost,' 'He for God only, she for God in him.' The first and by far the most difficult part of this antiquated ideal once realised, the second would be found to comprehend the way



of all blessing for man and woman alike. The woman's office in creation is to be magnified, her ways, in so far as she has been made 'subject to vanity, not willingly,' are to be justified, her more than Augustinian 'love of love' is to be satisfied; but all and strictly within the adamantine limits established, from the beginning, in the order of nature, by the Author of Life. . . .

In short Mr. Meredith's ideal is that of the thirteenth century, rescued from disrepute and ridicule, and shaped, so far as may be, to the uses of the third millennium.

Yet it is but natural that most writers on Meredith's heroines should expend their criticisms on the intellectual qualities of these fair women. Their individuality is so insistent that one is apt to overlook their physical attractions. We have noticed that not a few critics accuse the novelist of failing to visualise or realise his personages for us. The truth seems to be, as regards his heroines at least, that he does not so fail, but by overwhelming the mind of the reader with a veritable avalanche of character analysis, he is apt to blot out the picture of the personage which, at first and with the most intimate detail, he had been at pains to create. If we but read him carefully we shall find that his heroines and women-folk are all described with so much loving care that we cannot fail to see them with the mind's eye. The pity is in some cases that we might retain a clearer vision of them did we not bear them company to the end of the last chapter! Miss Elizabeth Luther Cary, an American writer in the *New York Critic*, October, 1905, has given more attention to the physical charms of his heroines than any of his other lady critics, and her observations are not without point:

Their aspect is never conventionally described, and occasionally, as in the case of Carinthia, it is of a type too rugged and large to be widely appreciated, but for the most part their author's study of graceful gesture and delicate surface and line result in unmis-takable combinations of beauty. The way of turning the head, the carriage and poise, the walk, are all acutely observed and recorded. We may forget the psychological features presented to us, but we are bound to remember the expressive faces, the slim spirited figures, the invariable grace and plasticity. In these portraits of women it is impossible, indeed, to get away from the suggestion of the painter's craft, such a passionate zest for the interpretation of colour and form is displayed. We are even haunted by intimations of particular masters with their individual ways of rendering technical problems. What student of English art, for example, can read of Lucy Desborough's fresh and tranquil comeliness with-

out seeing her lean from a canvas by Romney, the light of the English painter's ideal on her fairness and youth.

In the portraits of the later books there is sometimes less fluency, less felicity of touch, but always there are both distinction and life-likeness. The detailed description of Clara Middleton with 'the mouth that smiles in repose,' the eyelids lifted slightly at the outer corners, the equable shut mouth, and so on, is too categorical to charm, but there is the style of Botticelli in the other sketch of her walking 'insufferably fair' on the highway to Sir Willoughby's displeasure, in a dress 'cunning to embrace the shape and flutter loose about it like the spirit of a summer's day,' trailing her garlands and moving as if she were 'driving the clouds before her,' a sight 'to set the woodland dancing.' Another enchanting picture is that of Diana kneeling by the fire at *The Crossways*, 'a Madonna on an old black Spanish canvas,' to the eyes of her faithful champion; and still another is the vision of Vittoria singing her great song in the presence of the enemies of Italy, dressed 'like a noble damsel from the hands of Titian,' a figure in amber and pale blue silk, 'such as the great Venetian might have sketched from his windows on a day when the Doge went forth to wed the Adriatic: a superb Italian head, with dark banded hair-braid, and dark strong eyes under unabashed soft eyelids.' In the same gallery with these we must put the happy study of the child princess Ottilia on her pony, against the background of a German forest, and the swift sketch in outline of Rose Jocelyn in her black hat with its scarlet feather, on the deck of the homeward-bound *Jocasta*. It is difficult to conceive what Mr. Meredith's work would be for us without its pictorial side. No English writer so fills our mind with decorative figures and poetic landscape.

Readers of different tastes will naturally single out different types of female character as their favourites, and this is a matter in which individual taste may, to some extent, take the place of criticism, which strictly can have no 'favourites.' It is not criticism that decrees Diana Warwick the favourite of Meredith's heroines; but she would seem to have won the suffrages of most readers, and she is, perhaps, the most characteristic of his women. It is not criticism again that makes Sandra Belloni a wearisome bore to many readers of good sense. She is a finer creation of art than Diana, and yet even the critic, admiring the artistry, may find himself drawn more to Diana. Perhaps Diana may owe just a suspicion of her popularity to the impression that she was studied from life and was not without a scandal attaching to her name. And this raises a point that calls for some notice. In '*Diana of the Crossways*,' as in other works of his, the novelist deals to some

extent with personalities of recent history. There is, of course, no comparison between the treatment of the historical characters in 'The Tragic Comedians,' which is avowedly 'a study in a well-known story,' and the extent to which a popular story concerning that celebrated woman of wit and beauty, the Hon. Mrs. Caroline E. S. Norton, is made use of in 'Diana.' A great deal of confusion still seems to prevail over this matter. While, on the one hand, we still find writers guilty of stating that 'Diana' is the story of 'the Mrs. Norton who betrayed Peel's decision to repeal the Corn Laws to the *Times* for——' (fill up the blank with any silly thousands); on the other, we have writers, scarcely better informed, at pains to assure us that the character of 'Diana' is in no sense studied from Mrs. Norton and must be read as pure fiction, pointing triumphantly to the note with which the novelist has prefaced the book since its third edition in 1897:

A lady of high distinction for wit and beauty, the daughter of an illustrious Irish house, came under the shadow of a calumny.

It has latterly been examined and exposed as baseless. The story of 'Diana of the Crossways' is to be read as fiction.

So; but Meredith made use of the calumny in all good faith, believing the story to be true. There can be little doubt to any one who is familiar with the career of the charming and unfortunate lady of history that the Diana of fiction is largely modelled from her, and is credited in earnest with a baseness of which Mrs. Norton was never guilty. The slanderous nature of the story, which was an invention of some malicious gossip, had been repeatedly exposed even before 'Diana of the Crossways' was written, but evidently Meredith was not aware of this until the novel had been published and the old scandal revived. Mrs. Norton was one of the three beautiful granddaughters of Brinsley Sheridan and her eldest sister became Lady Dufferin, hence the efforts of the late Lord Dufferin, when, in 1894, the hoary scandal raised its head again in the autobiography of Sir William Gregory, to have the story authoritatively denied. He wrote to the late Henry Reeves, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, to help him in the matter, and in the issue of that periodical for January, 1895, Reeves referred to the incident in 'Diana of the Crossways' as 'suggested not by facts, but by calumnies which were exposed and refuted, though for a time they obtained circulation and a certain credence.' He also added the following note:

We observe with regret that the late Sir William Gregory in



[After the picture by Hauser]

THE HON. MRS. CAROLINE NORTON

Although we are rightly instructed that the story of 'Diana of the Crossways' is to be treated as fiction, it was admittedly based to some extent on the career and personality of this gifted and much wronged lady.

[To face p. 240.



his interesting autobiography has revived a calumnious and unfounded anecdote, to which Mr. Meredith had previously given circulation in this novel. We are enabled to state, and we do state, from our personal knowledge, that the story is absolutely false in every particular, and that the persons thus offensively referred to had nothing to do with the matter. The intention of the Government to propose the repeal of the Corn Laws was communicated openly by Lord Aberdeen to Mr. Delane, the editor of the *Times*; there was no sort of intrigue or bribery in the transaction.

There is the true account of the affair, and as 'Diana of the Crossways' had done not a little to give credence to the slander, the next edition of the novel bore the note which has been quoted above, and appears in all subsequent issues. But it will be seen from this that to assert that Meredith had in no sense studied his Diana from the celebrated Mrs. Norton is quite as wrong as to believe to-day that Mrs. Norton took money from the *Times* for disclosing a secret of State. Sheridan's gifted granddaughter, poetess and novelist, who lived apart from her husband for some fifty years, having been the innocent respondent to his groundless action for divorce when only twenty-eight—Lord Melbourne being cited as co-respondent—a woman of great beauty and brilliant intellectual gifts, the intimate of the most notable people of her day, but ever under the chill shadow of her unhappy marriage, was clearly the original of Diana.

The late Miss Hannah Lynch in her monograph on George Meredith gives us an uncommon view of Diana, and her comment on the episode of the betrayal of the State secret is eminently just. She writes :

As Sir Willoughby is Meredith's typical analysis of the male's character, so is Diana Warwick his chief type of woman, and just so ruthlessly as he is drawn is she drawn mercifully—too mercifully, perhaps, for she is painted in all the glowing colours of love. Mr. Meredith is not the analyser of Diana; he is her ardent lover. He adores her unscrutinisingly, as it behoves the true lover to adore his lady. He paints her very faults upon worshipping knees, and does not think it necessary to apologise for her or urge one word of excuse or depreciation when, following fact, she stoops to a shabby breach of confidence worthy the lowest new journalist. She is Diana to him in all her moods, a bewildering and adorable creature, and as such he expects the reader to swallow her thankfully, rejoicing in her as he does, wondering at the stupidity and evilness of the world that condemns her, censuring the meanness of the recreant lover who deserts her upon discovery of her unexplainable

betrayal of his confidences. If his lady chooses to start out at midnight, fresh from a love-scene in which she has learnt from her lover a great political secret, to sell it for a very substantial sum to a London editor, Mr. Meredith simply follows her as an admiring recorder, and finds it sufficient explanation to tell us pityingly that she was a child in this world's affairs, that she was as ignorant as a child in business matters, and has no idea of the gravity of her action. This last plea we accept willingly, for impulsive women like Diana rarely have any notion of the weight of actions, and never can measure their consequences; but for a simpleton in worldly affairs she shows a pretty accurate knowledge of the value of her secret and of its market price, and for a lady to sell secret information learnt in a love-scene seems to us an unmistakable fall which, however much we may deplore, we hold ourselves exempt from admiring, or even condoning, as Diana's apologist desires us to do.

Henley, in his brilliant critique of 'Diana' in the *Athenæum* of March 14, 1885, accepts the likeness between Diana and Mrs. Norton, but considers that while 'she suggests Mrs. Norton . . . she suggests George Meredith still more, and Rosalind most of all.'

The comparison is, no doubt, startling (writes Henley), but, we take it, it is legitimate. For such a union as she presents of capacity of heart and capacity of brain, of generous nature and fine intelligence, of natural womanhood and more than womanly wit and apprehensiveness, we know not where to look save among Shakespeare's ladies, nor with whom to equal her save the genius of Arden. Like Rosalind, she is pure woman; and like Rosalind (and her sisters) she has in her enough of her spiritual sire to proclaim her birthright and affirm the illustrious kinship. Mr. Meredith has wrought from within, and behind his Diana you feel the presence of her maker, as you are aware of Shakespeare when you consort with Rosalind and Hermione. Now and then her wit is, like Rosalind's, her father's own, her intelligence and expression are touched with a familiar attribute—when her empire totters, and her influence is for a second in peril of wavering. But this is only now and then. Throughout, as with Rosalind, her royal origin is patent otherwise; like Orlando's mistress, she betrays her parentage in a hundred gallant and inspiring qualities—the quickness and brilliance of her blood, her exquisite and abounding spirit, her delicate vigour of temperament, her swiftness of perception, her generous intensity of emotion. In love, in war, in friendship, in ambition and sorrow, in thought and deed and feeling, she is ever her noble self. She is admirable even in her delusions; you visit her errors with unflinching respect. She is a woman, she has a woman's needs; and she betrays them in turns so quick and warm, yet so

chaste and sweet, they make the reader think a certain episode in 'The Mill on the Floss' as grosser and more offensive than perhaps it really is. And the fate of Percy Dacier—'mated with a devious, filmy sentimentalist, likely "to fiddle harmonics on the sensual strings" for him at a mad rate in the years to come'—appears, albeit thoroughly deserved on his part, and on hers the earnest of salvation, a punishment almost savagely inhumane.

Henley was very obviously a whole-hearted admirer of Diana, the glamour of the woman had caught him, and, keen-witted critic though he was, we see him so fascinated by the woman whom the genius of Meredith had evoked that he does not even demur to the State secret episode which Miss Lynch, with all her Celtic enthusiasm, refused to accept. The late Cosmos Monkhouse, on the other hand, in his criticism of the novel in the *Saturday Review*, March 21, 1885, is prepared to believe Mrs. Norton guilty of that baseness, but Diana—no! His views are thus expressed:

It is to be doubted whether even a poet is a more difficult character for fiction than a witty woman of the world; and amongst all his intellectual and literary feats, Mr. Meredith has, perhaps, never accomplished one more striking than in making us feel that his Diana justified her reputation. He has made her move and speak before us as a living woman, dowered with exceptional gifts of 'blood and brains.' Of the two the brains 'have it' decidedly. She is too much like Charles II in the contrast between her sayings and doings. The latter are almost invariably foolish. Though not without precedent, she is none the less difficult to credit or to sympathise with in this particular. Her first folly, her marriage with a fool and a brute, is explained, but scarcely justified, by circumstances; the 'queenly comrade,' with 'a spirit leaping and shining like a mountain water,' should not have been at a loss for a nobler mate. To be 'the crystal spring of wisdom' to a potent old Minister was more worthy of her, and palliates much indiscretion, but to take up with and fall fatally in love with his inelastic and commonplace prig of a nephew, even though he also were a politician of some mark, was almost as silly as her marriage. She was young and impulsive, and love is blind, and the rest of it, no doubt, and that might be an excuse for her in real life, but in fiction the heroine has no right to go so very near wrecking herself on a character for whom the reader has not an atom of regard or admiration. Allowing, also, as historic the fact that a lady sold her friend's political secret to the *Times*, it yet seems incredible that Diana should do so; and it is still more improbable that this woman, so full of knowledge of the political world, should plead that she 'had not a suspicion of mischief' in doing so. But of the reality of her



brains there is no doubt; she is intellectually the same woman throughout. If she cannot manage her conduct wisely, she can reason about it. The reviews of her various situations of difficulty, her analysis of her own motives, her arguments for and against herself and the world, are at once clear and subtle, and stirring with vitality. Joyful or joyless, sweet or bitter, they are animated by the same rich intellect, the same noble and passionate soul.

Truly Diana is the heroine of all Meredith's heroines, not only in popular but in critical estimation, and one could go on at any length quoting from the tributes of the critics, for even Mr. W. L. Courtney describes her as 'a real living and breathing woman, gracious in all her divine impulse and her mortal errors;' but there are many others that claim our attention in the galaxy of Meredithian women. Perhaps Emilia Alessandra Belloni is the one whose name and image leap to the mind as readily as Diana's, though we have seen that the novelist himself seems to favour Clara Middleton in company with Diana. Sandra, whose story needs two long novels to do it justice, is certainly the most minutely studied of all the heroines, and consequently her character has been the subject of an immense amount of critical analysis. So long ago as 1864 Mr. Justin McCarthy wrote of her thus in the *Westminster Review*, ere yet she had taken the name of Vittoria :

Emilia's own character is the life and beauty of the story. She is genius without culture; goodness without rule; love without worldly restraint. Her passion for music, for Italy, and for Wilfrid is blended with consummate skill. I remember no character in modern literature that so faithfully pictures the nature which is filled with a genius for music. Not even Consuelo, in George Sand's novel, is so perfect an impersonation. The musical and the poetic are not represented in life by the same sort of human nature; but in books there is hardly any distinction ever drawn. The novelist commonly acts as if there were but one kind of artist nature, and as if the sole difference between painter, poet, and musician were contained in the different modes wherein the genius of each expresses itself. In life every one must be to some degree conscious how entirely unreal is this assumption. The most gifted musician often disappoints in intellectual companionship all but musicians. Intellect, and strangely enough the more poetic phase of intellect, seems often wanting in the singer whose whole soul is filled with music. Mr. Meredith has expressed his sense of this peculiarity in the admirably drawn character of Emilia. In everything, save that which regards song alone, her intellectual nature is commonplace and prosaic. Passion lifts her to heights which are

in themselves essentially poetic and dramatic; and a pure, truthful simplicity keeps her always above the vulgarities of existence. That which would vulgarise others is dignified by her; but still she has nothing whatever in her honest childlike heart which reminds one of the Sappho or the Corinna; or even of the stage singer whom ordinary romancists have sometimes painted.

Mr. Arthur Symons would seem to place Emilia at the head of all her fair sisterhood, and one cannot but admire his courage in contrasting her with a heroine of William Black's! The late Allan Monkhouse, too, was all for Sandra, rightly observing that the story of her early life cannot be excelled as an example of Meredith's power in simple, passionate narrative. He quotes the familiar passage beginning: 'Such a touch on the violin as my father has, you never heard.' And after remarking that this is an instance in which, to use a famous phrase, 'Nature takes the pen from him and writes,' he proceeds:

She is a natural young woman, a living refutation of the doctrine of original sin, and an assurance of her author's belief and hope in human nature. She does not comprehend evil, but instinctively abhors it. Without superficial cleverness, she penetrates to essentials. She has something of the primal gratitude and devotion of an animal. Among the highly-organised ladies of Brookfield she moves like a young panther among domestic cats. These civilised young persons who are, if less amusing, on a higher plane of comedy than the Countess de Saldar, have some reason to complain of the fate that confronts them with nature in the phenomenal forms of Emilia and Mrs. Chump, by whom their distinctions, their reserves, their ideals, are roughly broken down and inexorably scattered.

Perhaps the less said about Mrs. Chump the better. Mrs. Berry most people consider a success, Mr. Le Gallienne saying she is a character that would have been a feather in the cap of Dickens. 'Doubtless,' retorts Miss Hannah Lynch, 'but that is not a compliment to Mr. Meredith, for what would do honour to Dickens cannot be said to be worthy of him.' After such a piece of 'criticism' I may be asked why I proceed to quote from the writer. Well, hers is the voice of a woman—and an extremely able woman—and she leads us through Mrs. Berry to Lucy with some sound sense to boot, so that we may forgive the injustice to Dickens. Miss Lynch writes:

Mrs. Berry is witty and original to an alarming degree. She

is a sort of compromise between Mrs. Quickly and Juliet's nurse; not quite so coarse as either, perhaps, but more exhaustively garrulous and obtrusive. In the fifteenth century she might have been possible and pleasant, but not so in ours. She is an anachronism that we resent. The fault may be with us, but the fact remains, that we could not tolerate a Mrs. Berry in the flesh. . . .

A gentleman who loved his Lamb and relished his Dickens would put up with her for the sake of her wit and originality, accepting her as a possible character, which I am not disposed to do. But no young girl, with even less of Lucy's refinement, could submit to her gross indelicacy in that scene between them in the Isle of Wight. We know how reticent and shy young girls have become since Juliet's day; still more so young brides with the most intimate of their sex—their mothers and their sisters; how easily affronted are their susceptibilities by the slightest trending towards ground they so savagely regard as sacred. It is as much as one's life is worth almost to speak to a very young bride about her married life; above all, if she be deeply enamoured of her husband, and for her mother to seek to unveil it would be sacrilege. . . . This reproach I make to Lucy is not only in the case of her tolerance of Mrs. Berry's coarse talk, but in the occupation it enters her mind to allot her undeclared lover, Lord Montfalcon. I reproach, in fact, Mr. Meredith, with the entire creation, all the more so as she is the only girl he has drawn upon the old wearisome lines of masculine taste, of the eternal old-fashioned ivy-type, common-place, loving and pretty, without character or interest apart from her second in the immortal duet with his breathless love. She is charming, as all creatures lovely to look upon and purely natural must be charming; but the freshness of youth and the pleasant daisy-and-buttercup flavour vanished with the years and increasing domestic cares, what would there have remained in her to interest us and satisfy a soaring nature like Richard's?

This is, on the whole, a very reasonable estimate of Lucy and is in tune with criticism generally. It has the additional value of being a woman's estimate. Men and women are alike in thinking that Lucy is Meredith's most conventional heroine; but perhaps Miss Lynch, when she goes on to speak of Clara Middleton, is more of the woman than the critic. She writes:

In all fiction there is not another girl so enchanting and healthily intelligent as Clara Middleton—none described like her. In addition to the attractions of birth, breeding, and beauty which the writer thoroughly relishes, are those of sensibilities that can be delicate without affectation, a delightful wit untainted by smartness, singular good taste and tact, and honesty of soul. Here is a sparkling



*Photograph by courtesy of  
"The Defender"*

*[From the material by  
Mr. Herbert P. Hoff]*

CLARA MIDDLETON.

'Just the whiff of mirth of a daughter of a peccadillo Goddess

*[To face p. 240.]*



young woman as clear as daylight, as fresh as the morning dew, beautiful to look upon, as Meredith's women always are, sweet and switching without any shabby tricks of mind or habit, who at the same time thinks for herself, a rare virtue in the male novelist's heroines. She is all warm blood and variable moods; as befits her age and sex, but never once untrue to the finest instincts of maidenhood, and unerring in her judgment. She is not perfect, her accomplishments are not enumerated, we never find her playing Beethoven or reading the stars, and somehow without one word having been said upon the subject, we get the impression that she is a young woman of intellectual resources, and qualified to pronounce upon the subjects that engage the minds of sages and artists, while the music of youth runs blithely through her veins, and her feet are nimble in a race with a school-boy.

Perhaps the most comprehensive survey of 'The Women of Meredith' yet attempted was Mr. Garnet Smith's long and closely written essay with that title in the *Fortnightly* of May, 1896. It is indeed so finely spun in warp and woof that it is not easy to make quotation from it; and none too easy to gather the drift of it, as the writer has packed too much criticism and study into too little space. Of Clara he writes:

Clara Middleton is a Cecilia, but capable of some strength; English, but enlivened by Irish blood. She has pledged herself to Sir Willoughby, the Egoist, the spoiled favourite of society, in ignorance, before her character is formed. The Egoist is rather the Paternal Despot, the Autolater; chiefly, the Sentimental Egoist, therefore womanish, and requiring that his betrothed shall be weakly womanish, adorned with sentimental attributes, characterless. Clara, outwearied by the monotonous sentimentality of his love-speeches, grows critical, detects in him the sentimental egoist. Hungering for liberty, she must make account of restraining honour and cowardice, and comes to more or less clear recognition that to be honourable, dutiful, is to outrage and deform her nature. Learning that the Egoist had been already detected, that a previous betrothed had taken courageous flight with a courageous comrade, she looks about for such a comrade. Vernon Whitford, no sentimentalist, only proffers reasonable advice, bids her know her own mind, rely on decisive courage. . . . Mr. Meredith, condemning the Egoist to self-punishment, passes a favourable verdict on Clara and Vernon, takes them under his protection. Clara, if, like Cecilia, she dallies with the ideal of the disengaged mind, if she reveals herself weak and sentimental and womanish, and such as man has made of her sex, has not fluttered all too cowardly. Like Sandra, Rhoda, and Diana, she has educated herself to the perception that if most men are weak and tyrannous, some few are unselfish, serviceable, and

strong, able to be helpmates; that woman, as she is constituted at present, is incapable of self-reliant freedom, needs a sustaining helpmate. Vernon bears the due stamp; Vernon, at least, has reason enough for two, and the pair between them may possibly compass some measure of serviceable strength.

Of Rhoda Fleming Mr. Garnet Smith says :

Rhoda Fleming, like Sandra, is a child of nature, strong, very natural. Not of 'the comfortable classes,' a farmer's daughter, she has thus escaped, even as Sandra, the deformation of training to cowardice. Rhoda is proffered passionate love by strong Robert; but Rhoda is a savage, freedom-loving virgin. She has some idea, indeed, that the love of a dainty 'gentleman' would be preferable to that of a rough Robert, but her passion and pride are fixed on her weak sister Dahlia; and Dahlia is betrayed by a 'gentleman.' 'It is ignorance that leads to the unhappiness of girls. How can girls know what men are?' she cries. She will right her sister at all hazards. Stern, bitterly strong, she achieves that which she judges to be just, rights her sister most wrongly, thwarts the repentance of her sister's lover and beloved. . . . There is tragedy in Rhoda's strenuousness in well-meaning error. . . . Mr. Meredith—ardent match-maker on philosophic principles—is desirous that men and women shall be strong and passionate in love, that so they may be helpful to each other and the world; and as condition of helpfulness he posits that first they shall understand each other. The women of the comfortable classes do not understand men, he is sure, because they are educated to be ignorant; Rhoda, not of these, does not understand Robert because, wholly untutored for good or ill, she is ignorant that the strong man can help her. Robert knows that she can help him, can reclaim his passionate strength from vicious waste; Rhoda comes to know that without his help her strength runs out to error. Let them mate, and either is helpmate to the other, and their joint sagacities will hit right action in the white; the pair are serviceable to the world. Add two wasteful strengths together, and you get due economy, it would seem. Or rather, perhaps, their added strengths will be mutually corrective.

It is in the treatment of such a character as Dahlia Fleming that we are reminded of what the unsentimental Meredith may be said to owe to the sentimental Richardson. Clarissa Harlowe made Diana and Sandra possible, and Richardson on the moral issue was as much ahead of his age as Meredith was of his on the intellectual. As an able but anonymous writer in *Macmillan's Magazine* of March, 1902, shows very persuasively, Richardson and Meredith come together in their treatment of the unmated woman with a sympathy



*Photograph by courtesy of  
'The Tystander'*

*[Portrait by  
Mr. Herbert L. Lefter]*

**RHODA FLEMING**

'She has a steadfast look in her face. She doesn't look as if she trifled.'





we look for, with little hope of finding, in early Victorian fiction, and with none at all in eighteenth-century fiction outside of Richardson. In the days of Richardson and later, pursuit and conquest, with 'the rapture of pursuing' as the prize and not the conquest, represented the relationship of the sexes, rather than that state of 'duel' which Meredith takes as typical of his own time, and a great advance on the age preceding. A consequence was that the unpursued female was an object of scorn: she who was betrayed by the male hunter, run to earth, and then abandoned, had at least the dismal satisfaction of having been pursued! Thus the 'old maid' grew into a stock figure of fiction, represented as a pitiful, ogling creature, manœuvring blatantly for the attention of the males and corroded with jealousy of her female friends: in brief, an object of heartless contempt. So we find her in Fielding and only less so in Dickens, both novelists representing faithfully the norm of their age. As the writer in *Macmillan's* aptly observes:

We can easily imagine what either of them would have made of Lætitia Dale in 'The Egoist.' Lætitia is a spinster, decidedly faded, who has cared, and allowed it to be known that she cared, for a man who has flirted with her and thrown her over. When that man brings a younger and brighter rival on the scene, we might expect some reminiscence of the convention of Fielding and Dickens. But Mr. Meredith never for a moment allows Lætitia to appear ridiculous. In her explanation of her position to Clara there is an accent of real dignity. 'Ten years back, I thought of conquering the world with a pen. The result is that I am glad of a fireside, and not sure of always having one, and that is my achievement. Last year's sheddings from the tree do not form an attractive garland. Their merit is that they have not the ambition. I am like them.'

Another point is suggested by the relations of Lætitia with her rival, and other groupings of women which will occur to any reader of Mr. Meredith's work. That two women can be in love with the same man, and be loyal, just, and forbearing to each other; that the loss of youth and charm, and the empire that they give, may be accepted with temper and dignity, are conceptions quite as familiar in modern novels as they are to the observer of ordinary life. But that they are so, is surely due, in some measure at least, to the influence of Richardson. . . .

Again and again in Mr. Meredith's books there is the perception of what a woman may owe to a woman. We remember how that blunt Englishwoman, Janet Ilchester, met the Princess Ottilia, and 'her first radiant perception of an ideal in her sex.' We remember the patriotic comradeship of Vittoria and Laura Piaveni, and that

episode when Sandra, an innocent outcast on the London streets, craves pitifully for a woman's arms about her and a woman's tenderness.

Although there is much that might be written and more that might be quoted, of such wonderfully different female characters as the Countess de Saldar and Lady Charlotte—which latter Mr. Garnet Smith likens to the heroines of George Sand—of Georgiana Powys and the Pole sisters, of 'Mrs. Mel' and Laura Piaveni, of Janet Ilchester, the Princess Ottilia, Cecilia Halkett, Jenny Denham, Renée de Croisnel, Nataly, Nesta, Mrs. Lovell, Aminta, Carinthia Jane, Chloe—'one of Mr. Meredith's chosen ladies, very loving, much enduring, smiling for all wounds, gentle, decorous, distinguished,' says Mrs. Meynell—and the many other strongly individualised women of Meredith's fiction, it is impossible here to pursue the subject, interesting and alluring though it be, into the detail of these characters, which, of course, have already been under discussion in other chapters of this work. The mere mention of their names is enough to remind the reader already acquainted with them—if such reminder were ever necessary—how marvelously rich, fresh and unconventional is the gallery in which the portraits of Meredith's women characters are assembled. His portraiture of womenkind is certainly unique in modern fiction.

But before leaving the subject there is one character, concerning whom something further may be noted—Clotilde von Rüdiger. Like Diana, like the tragic Chloe also, Clotilde is studied from life, 'only more so.' 'The Tragic Comedians' is a human document; the remarkable woman whose character is so remorselessly analysed in it, and against whom the novelist pronounces formal judgment while showing her in a light that warms her humanly to us, is still alive, or was living at a very recent date. In the story the novelist has adhered closely to the facts as they are known, and as Mr. James Huneker, the brilliant American critic, proves in his article on 'A Half-Forgotten Romance' (*New York Bookman*, October, 1907), though he declares that Meredith has not been as faithful to the 'well-known story' as he might have been. Mr. Huneker's paper, which is one of great interest to all Meredithians, opens with a description of a scene in a German restaurant in New York some twenty years ago, where he saw for the first time 'the Red Countess,' a striking and admirable figure of a woman. 'She must have been in the forties, and the contour of her finely moulded head, her aristocratic bearing and the air of one accustomed to

command' attracted his attention. She was none other than the Countess Shevitch, formerly the Princess Racowitza, originally Helena von Doënniges, the original of Clotilde. Her husband for political reasons was self-exiled in New York, where both were then supporting themselves by their pens—the Countess had written a book entitled 'Rags,' depicting the seamy side of New York life—but soon after this time they returned to Europe on the Count regaining possession of his estates, and their home at Munich, according to Mr. Huneker, 'is a magnet for the literary, musical and artistic elements of that delightful city on the green river Isar.'

Quickly to summarise the facts that mainly concern us: Helena von Doënniges was the daughter of a General of that name, Bavarian Ambassador to Switzerland, and both her parents were extreme Protestant types. She was 'educated in a Hebrew-hating house,' as Mr. Huneker—whom one suspects of Hebrew origin—puts it. At this time Ferdinand Lassalle (Dr. Alvan of 'The Tragic Comedians') was 'the fine flower of the Jewish-German; a thinker, a born leader, and one of the handsomest men of his day.' Bismarck feared and respected him, and, though leader of the German Democratic party, he had many friends among the eminent public men of the day. His father, moreover, was rich, and Ferdinand himself was one of the most brilliant men at the bar. There were rumours that he was dissolute, and though Mr. Huneker shows how unfounded and slanderous such stories must have been, this was doubtless the cause of Helena's parents opposing with every device and force the union of their daughter with this man. The facts of Lassalle's relationship with the Countess Hatzfeldt (the Baroness Lucie of the novel) are set forth as follows by Mr. Huneker:

A few years later he became immersed in the legal affairs of Countess Hatzfeldt, who, desiring to sever her marriage with a gay husband, employed the young lawyer with the eloquent tongue. If Helena von Doënniges was his fate, so was this Hatzfeldt woman, who stood by him in all his troubles, always playing the friend—some deny she was anything else—and giving him an annuity of 7,000 thalers for winning the case against her husband, that gave her a share in large landed estates. But there was a disagreeable occurrence during the progress of the trial. Count Hatzfeldt presented a certain feminine acquaintance of his with an annuity bond of £1,000 value. Lassalle, they say, instigated the pursuit of both bond and lady and secured the former for the

Countess. His companions in the undertaking were arrested, indicted, condemned to prison. Ferdinand escaped only after a trial in Cologne, in 1848, and because of his irresistible address in the court-room. Nevertheless, the story of the stolen *cassette* stuck to him, and coupled with the fact that he had been imprisoned six months for participation in the socialist riots at Düsseldorf in 1846, his reputation was too much for the Von Doënniges. Wagner disliked him; some say he was jealous of his personal success. Von Bülow, the pianoforte virtuoso, admired him, though Lassalle offended him when he declared that Cosima von Bülow was a blue-stocking. 'Citizen of the world,' as he delighted to call himself, Lassalle was at the height of his powers, intellectual and physical, when he was introduced to Helena von Doënniges.

This fateful meeting was some time in January, 1862, the lovers having first heard of each other's attractions—her 'gold-crested' beauty, his wit and eloquence—from mutual friends. Mr. Huneker goes on to explain why Helena was attracted to Ferdinand, in these terms :

Just because Lassalle was abused at home for a Jew, a demagogue and a man who was said to live on the bounty of a titled woman—the latter was a false assertion—just because of these well-nigh inscrutable barriers, the capricious young person fell in love with him; while he, desirous of settling in life and not blandly indifferent to the social flesh-pots of the proud Munich family, assumed the attitude of the accepted conqueror. Mr. Meredith gives an electric presentment of the first meeting; but for a more sober, more truthful rendering of the same incident, it is better to go to Helena von Doënniges-Shevitch herself. She published in Breslau, 1879, a little volume entitled *Meine Beziehungen zu Ferdinand Lassalle* (My Relations with Ferdinand Lassalle). . . . There are many *lacunæ* in this confession of an unhappy woman, yet the impression of sincerity is unmistakable; too much so for Mr. Meredith, who was in search of a human document over which he could play his staccato wit and the sheet-lightnings of his irony.

It will be noticed that the American critic is no admirer of Meredith, and it must be his prejudice against the novelist that makes him declare the latter has distorted facts while he presents the 'facts' himself precisely as they are to be read in 'The Tragic Comedians.' But it is interesting thus to notice how the actual story of the two chief personages in this historic love-drama runs with Meredith's fiction. Mr. Huneker proceeds to summarise from Helena's published confessions, and judge ye if the results are not precisely an epitome of the same episodes in 'The Tragic Comedians' :



[If I am not mistaken]

# STOICISM OF THE TRAGIC COMEDIANS

ILLIACIOUSNESS, who married the Prince Tacwiz  
 after his death, and the Prince Tacwiz, who  
 died fatally for the latter, and the Prince Tacwiz  
 Countess Shvitch.



We learn from Helena that she was no novice at flirtation, and that, like many girls of high spirit, she refused to be auctioned off to the highest bidder by her worldly parents. She resolved to marry Lassalle. There were cries of indignation. She was sent to Switzerland, but at the Righi she contrived to meet Lassalle. Contemporaneous with her passion for him, she permitted the amiable attentions of a young Wallachian prince, Von Racowitza, 'a Danube osier with Indian-idol eyes,' as Meredith calls him. This prince, affectionate, good-hearted, rich, was the choice of Helena's parents. She told him that she loved Lassalle and that she intended to marry him. The prince concurred in her plans. He was a nice youth and as pliant as a reed. Finally, at Geneva, in the summer of 1864, seeing that she would be sequestered by her father, she left his roof and went to Lassalle's hotel, accompanied by her faithful servant, Marie-Thérèse—a venal wretch, as she found out later.

Then Lassalle assumed his most operatic attitude. Elopement? Never! Either you come to me, a gift from your father's hands——! You may guess the pose of the fiery orator. Bewildered, the girl could not understand that the man feared the loss of political prestige if he carried off the daughter of a prominent government official. So he procrastinated—those whom the gods hate they make put off the things of to-day until to-morrow. Proudly—for Lassalle's pride was veritably satanic—he returned Helena to a family friend—she refused to go home—and her parents were summoned. There was a painful interview between the mother and Lassalle—Helena in the background—one that would make a magnificent fourth act for an ambitious dramatist.

What follows in Mr. Huneker's words is equally fact for fact with the sequence of the novelist's story, with the added detail as to the venal Thérèse:

Lassalle kept his temper and went away decidedly the hero of the occasion. Alas! he also left Helena to the tender mercies of two enraged parents. The General entered cursing and actually dragged his daughter by the hair through the dark avenues to her home. Locked up, without the slightest hope of reaching Lassalle—she was told that he had immediately left the city—threatened with severe personal abuse, for General von Doenniges was an old-style Teutonic father, the wretched girl lost all hope. Daily was she upbraided by her parents, by her sister and brother. The entire family battery was trained on her, and as she despaired of Lassalle—she was assured by forged proofs that he was glad to get rid of her—and was sick in body as well as soul, she capitulated. She promised not to see him. What she didn't know was that Lassalle was raising heaven and earth to get at her; that he had appealed to Church, State, to the Court itself; that he had recruited an army



of friends, and, finally, that he had bribed the unspeakable Thérèse, Helena's maid, with 180 francs to carry a letter, planning an escape, to her mistress. Thérèse took the letter to the General and was given 20 francs, thus selling the poor girl for £8. Police guarded the house. Negotiations were forced on Von Doenniges by the now aroused Lassalle, who realised what a mistake he made when he had juggled with fortune, no matter what his exalted motives.

So to the end the novelist is faithful to the 'well-known story': the challenge from Lassalle to General von Doenniges, the acceptance of the same by Helena's princely lover, the 'Indian Bacchus,' and the death of Lassalle on August 31, 1864, in the agonies of peritonitis caused by the bullet of the timid, inexperienced prince. Mr. Huneker, referring to Helena's own confession, now carries the story to its conclusion, and throws a side-light on the character of the woman and the circumstances in which she was placed, that is distinctly valuable by way of corrective criticism as to the novelist's own reading of Clotilde's mind and heart:

And now our credulity must be strained. Six months after Lassalle's interment, Helena von Doenniges, hating her parents, at war with the world and herself, turned to the only friend she had in all Germany—Yanko von Racowitza. He was half dying. The shock of events had been too much for his frail, sensitive nature. In pity and as a terrible penance, Helena outraged the world by marrying the slayer of her lover. Five months later she buried him. . . . Meredith depicts Clotilde as 'the imperishable type of that feminine cowardice' to which he says all women are trained. This may be true of the characters in the book, not of Helena. Young women who are imprisoned and stuffed with lies about their lover are not cowardly if they weaken, especially after the shocking experience Helena had undergone with Lassalle. She had, brave as she was, put all to the test and had lost. Is it any wonder that her nerves played her false when the man—as she thought—had deserted her? At least she cannot be compared with the lady in Browning's 'Statue and the Bust.' Helena greatly dared.

And behind all this really tragic romance (not a tragic comedy) was something the English novelist forgot—the mating of a young man with a young woman; which is, whether we subscribe to Schopenhauer's view or not, the most significant fact in the life of our planet. The world was well lost for love by Lassalle; for Helena von Doenniges nothing remained but the mastication of Dead Sea fruit. When we understand, we sympathise.

While Meredith is in some sort an unsympathetic optimist, Mr. Huneker would appear to be a sympathetic pessimist, but as regards

Clotilde he does the novelist the injustice of taking him at his word. Here Meredith suffers at times, womanlike. The American critic is right in quoting the novelist as to the 'imperishable type of feminine cowardice'—woman's cardinal sin, as courage is her greatest virtue, according to Meredith—but while the illustration of this is the obvious aim of the novel, the author has contrived to give so large a view to the character of Clotilde, to light it from so many sides, that the lasting impression is not the mere memory of another lesson in 'feminine cowardice,' but of a strong, passionate, impulsive woman, foredoomed to tragic life, capable of great love and great sacrifice. Indeed, a curious feature of Clotilde is that she is often beyond the control of the novelist, who allows her to do and say the things that win our sympathies, while condemning her when he plays the part of chorus. Surely the sympathy of every reader is with Clotilde when, warm with love for Dr. Alban and ready for any sacrifice, the hero is true to his theatrical star and returns her to her parents, that he may give later an exhibition of his giant power in winning her from them by legitimate methods. Emphatically, after that Clotilde has every honestly human heart on her side, and Meredith makes us feel this, while still theorising on the 'cowardice' theme: in a word, the novelist is here stronger than the philosopher, though the latter had hoped for the ascendancy!

The last word on Meredith's womenkind may be given to Mr. Garnet Smith, who thus sums up his long and intimate study already quoted:

Mr. Meredith has conceived a great distaste for what he takes to be the Hanoverian or early Victorian type of woman; and, accordingly, since individuality, character, rests in divergence from type, presents his heroines as having at least the instinct and desire to be wholly divergent from this type of his abomination. We were told long ago that there is a constant feud between the philosopher and the poet, the moralist and the artist. If the moralist were to have his way; if all men and women were what he would have them be; monotony would ensue, the artist's occupation would be gone. Happily for Mr. Meredith, the artist, his heroines range freely between the extremes he poses, have their varying moods of submission and revolt, of relapse to the detested and aspiration to the desired type—are so vivid, indeed, in their seasons of aspiration and revolt that the men they meet seem but as dull foils. And, alas! if Mr. Meredith, the novelist, were to have his way! For would not the artist then have to set about presenting heroines individually, characteristically divergent from his desired type? To escape the dilemma, one might perchance take refuge in the theory

that women are 'of mixed essences shading off the divine to the considerably lower,' as Mr. Meredith somewhere writes; that there are different spiritual species of the genus woman, recurrent in each and every age under changeful disguises. But if the moralist is to have his way, then he must constrain the artist to win the ear of young men and maidens, that so the Meredithian woman may be demanded and supplied. Youth, however, as Mr. Meredith knows, requires simple, decisive directness; and Mr. Meredith is complex and indecisive just because he takes careful philosophic account of truth and life. Is it, or is it not, a paradox that he is less likely to win the ear of young England in proportion to his wisdom? True wisdom, at least, is always complex and given to self-contradiction; and Mr. Meredith at some time or other reconsiders and attenuates all the more trenchant of his statements. Whereby he further renders nugatory such critical restatements as are all too simple and decisive.



(permission of Messrs. Smith, Elder)

OT1111A

as the drawing by Giovanni da Ma  
in the 'Cornhill.'

I saw her standing with a silver lamp raised in her right hand to the level of her head, as if  
she expected to meet obscurity. She was like a statue of twilight.

—*Horrocks* *Reverend* Chapter XXV.

[The artist has made a mistake as to the hand in which Ottilie carried the light—a not uncommon error when  
drawing an unpractised picture having to be drawn reversed.]

[In fact p. 256.



## XI

### HIS POETRY

Earth made herself a laureate, to bring  
The hearts of all her children to the light:  
She took a meteor in the tracks of flight  
To be his brain—in jewels scattering.

So that with lovelier cadence he might sing  
She gave him of the voices of the night.  
And there was nothing hidden from his sight  
In all the tale of man's imagining.

Earth's minstrel! You have chanted to and fro,  
The boon companion of the wandering wind,  
For you have tarried where love's roses grow  
And soared where eagles would be stricken blind:  
From rapture to profundities of mind;  
And there you found the wand of Prospero.

HENRY BAERLEIN in the *Daily Chronicle*.

To attempt a study of Meredith's poetry in a single chapter were a task that no one familiar with his subject would essay. Yet all that is most worthy of his poetry would fill a comparatively small octavo volume. Its importance is out of all proportion to its bulk. One may doubt if so small a body of poetical writing has in modern times drawn forth one half of the criticism which has been lavished on that of Meredith. Of late years it has been far more discussed by the critics than his prose, and bids fair to swamp the novels in literary interest.

There is something of the caprice of fashion in this. His poems were long neglected, and while his reputation as a novelist was steadily enhancing, the few and slender volumes of his verse had only here and there a discerning reader. Then one by one the critics discovered that this master of the art of fiction was not less, and in some ways more, a master of the art of poetry, so they switched their searchlights on to what had erstwhile been his darker craft and, lo, his poetical barques were now seen sailing in a blaze of light! Truly, volumes might be compiled from the criticism of Meredith's verse and of high merit, for the criticism of poetry is

apt to bring out what is best in its writers. It has produced, for instance, so notable a work as Mr. G. M. Trevelyan's 'Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith,' a piece of brilliant exposition which ranks with the best in its class; worthy of its subject and the splendid traditions its author has inherited.

Clearly, then, there can be no attempt in this present chapter at a deliberate and definite study of Meredith's poetry, especially as Mr. Trevelyan's work must be familiar to every student; but it is possible to present here, within the compass of a single chapter, a useful contribution to the criticism of the poet, by passing in review the opinions of all the noteworthy critics, and so to arrive at some general notion of the trend of that body of criticism. In order to achieve even this, it will be necessary, I find, to set limits to the chapter, which I imagine Mr. Trevelyan would approve, for he declares that 'poetical inspiration and intellectual power are developed each to the same degree,' in Meredith's poetry, whereas 'in most writers one is the handmaid of the other.' Nay, more than this, 'in Mr. Meredith they contend or unite on equal terms.' This means that poetical power and intellectual power are different forms of energy and may be considered apart. I am none too certain of the truth of this; it is a proposition capable of much discussion. But this, I think, will be allowed; the æsthetics, the literary technique of poetry, comprehended in the wider and noble conception of 'poetical power,' is capable of treatment apart from the philosophy, the teaching, or the 'intellectual power,' if you will of the poetry. To separate from the criticism of Meredith's poetry what concerns only its æsthetics and what its philosophy is not entirely practicable, so closely has criticism applied itself to the poetry as a unified expression of the philosopher's mind. But in culling some flowers of literary criticism I gather also some sprigs of philosophical criticism, the chapter which is to follow of Meredith's philosophy can well stand the loss, so rich a store ready for garnering there.

Criticism is very far indeed from being harmonious in the matter of the novelist's poetry; farther from harmony, if possible, than in respect to the poet's prose. Yet there is not one writer who not prepared to concede to Meredith the occasional achievement the highest. Indeed the sum-total of the criticism of the poet is on a par with that of the prose: an artist capable of the best achieving it sometimes, failing oftener than he succeeds, but wiping out all his failures in the greatness of his successes. As a critic

sequence, criticism would make quite a small selection of Meredith's poetry which is assured of immortality; but it would still be sufficient to keep his name among England's true poets, though not among the greatest. As we proceed we shall note what are the poems, what the qualities of the poet, that justify this opinion.

That the author of 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' is a poet, is patent to any reader without the need to turn to his books of verse for proof. Indeed, some critics are tempted to declare him more of a poet in his novels than he is in his poems. 'He has the poet's concrete vision,' says Mr. Brownell, alluding to his prose; but his poetic faculty, though 'very clear and very distinguished,' as 'exhibited in his formal verse' is 'perhaps too surcharged with significance to have the plastic interest essential to verse.' In this judgment Mr. Brownell is by no means alone. One of the finest studies of the poetry was published in the *Times* on the celebration of the eightieth birthday, and there we find this point advanced with more precision, but with special reference to the poet's interpretation of Nature, or Earth:

He does, perhaps, teach and preach and argue about her a little too much, but no one can make the surrender to the spell of her beauty more completely than he. That may be known indeed through the novels to those who have never read a line of his verse. And, fiercely as he likes to declare his adhesion to the bare facts of her, he will take her beautiful things and give them back to us drenched with a dew of human emotion that might come from Keats himself. Who that has ever read of it has forgotten the stream that ran through Beckley Park, whose 'view was sweet and pleasant to Evan Harrington as winding in and out, to east, to north, it wound to embowered hopes in the lover's mind, to tender dreams.' Of the 'Golden lie the meadows: golden run the streams' of Richard Feverel there is no need to ask the question, nor of much else. It is true that there is nothing in the poems quite so perfect as these enchanted islands of the novels; and it is strange, as some of his admirers think, that his greatest handling of the human drama should be no novel but a set of sonnets, and his nearest approaches to that beauty which is the visible form of the harmony of Heaven and Earth and the Human Soul should not be poems at all but prose passages in the novels. Still, the poet of 'Love in the Valley,' 'The Lark Ascending,' 'The Woods of Westermain,' 'The Day of the Daughter of Hades,' 'Phœbus with Admetus,' 'Melampus,' 'The South-Wester,' 'The Thrush in February,' is a great poet; not *only*, in his own phrase, of the 'Joy of the Earth,' but also of her beauty. It is true that he never attains to the divine spontaneity with which the greatest men have



handled Nature. Here, as everywhere in him, the intellect overweighs not only the imagination but even the soul, so that he cannot attain to that melodious union of all the forces which supreme poetry demands. He seems too often to be giving us the fresh observation, the original thought, which had the making of a great poem or great passage in them; but it is not made.

This feeling of failure may be due chiefly and inevitably to the Celtic strain in the character of the poet, as I think I have endeavoured elsewhere to illustrate. The Celt stands for failure and derives his romantic interest from the falling short of supreme achievement. The late Grant Allen in his study of 'The Celt in English Art,'—*Fortnightly*, February, 1891,—remarked that:

Our fairy lore is in large part Celtic, as is also the great mass of our ballad poetry: the touch of fancy, of beauty, of melancholy, of pathos, of the marvellous, the mysterious, the vague, the obscure in all our literary work descends to us as an heirloom from the elder and less successful race in these islands. From it we derive our Carlyles and our Merediths.

And towards the conclusion of the same article he wrote:

One day this last summer, I came straight back from Bruges, and fresh from my Memlings, looked again at the Briar Rose. How exquisite, how sad, how tender, how soulful! The deep melancholy of the Celtic temper—so human, so humanising—the rich dower of a conquered race, long oppressed and ground down, speaks forth with mute eloquence from every storied line of it. Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought. From Ossian and Llywarch Hln to Burne-Jones and George Meredith, Celtic art in all forms has struck that note most consistently.

Naturally most of the critics have instituted comparisons or likenesses between the poetry and the prose, so that the poet has probably suffered here from having furnished in his prose fiction certain standards by which he may be judged. Thus we find W. E. Henley writing in 'Views and Reviews':

His verse has all the faults and only some of the merits of his prose. Thus he will rhyme you off a ballad, and to break the secret of that ballad you have to take to yourself a dark lantern and a case of jemmies. I like him best in 'The Nuptials of Attila.' If he always wrote as here, and were always as here sustained in inspiration, rapid of march, nervous of phrase, apt of metaphor, and moving in effect, he would be delightful to the general, and



U I R M U

# THE HEAD OF BLAN

Princesse n enchaing haids  
 Dearth let hea th mew tr i  
 If it sakes and still commands  
 E az n hat t forward



that without sacrificing on the vile and filthy altar of popularity. Here he is successfully himself, and what more is there to say? You clap for Harlequin, and you kneel to Apollo. Mr. Meredith doubles the parts, and is irresistible in both. Such fire, such vision, such energy on the one hand and on the other such agility and athletic grace are not often found in combination.

This is the merit and distinction of art: to be more real than reality, to be not nature but nature's essence. It is the artist's function not to copy but to synthesise; to eliminate from that gross confusion of actuality which is his raw material whatever is accidental, idle, irrelevant and select for perpetuation that only which is appropriate and immortal. Always artistic, Mr. Meredith's work is often great art.

While Henley's remark as to the obscurity of the ballad form, where directness and simplicity are the first essentials, is true on the whole, and as intended by the critic, it does not apply generally, and indeed no criticism applies generally, to Meredith. Swinburne, for instance, in his 'Essays and Studies,' declares that Rossetti's 'Sister Helen' is, 'out of all sight or thought of comparison the greatest ballad in modern English,' and adds that 'perhaps not very far below it, and certainly in a high place among the attempts in that way of living Englishmen, we might class George Meredith's pathetic and splendid poem of "Margaret's Bridal Eve."' Put this with Henley's reference to Meredith's capacity for failure in the ballad form and you have as near an approach as possible to a judgment on almost any aspect of his art.

Just as it would be difficult to convey to one who had not already read the poems for himself any real notion of their beauty by means of quotation, so is it difficult to set down in any general terms a criticism of the poetry. There are about half-a-dozen passages from 'The Woods of Westernmain,' 'Love in the Valley,' 'Modern Love,' and 'Melampus' that are certain to be quoted in every article that deals with the poetry. I could prove this literally, if necessary. This does not so much suggest the sheepishness of the critics in following a lead, as the difficulty of illustrating the poetry by quotation. Equally, criticism is apt to diffuse itself in the treatment of certain poems and not of the poetry as a whole. Notable among those who have attempted to present a view of Meredith the poet in terms of general criticism is the veteran of the art, Professor Edward Dowden, who writes as follows in his study of 'Mr. Meredith in his Poems' in the *Fortnightly*, March, 1892 (reprinted in 'New Studies in Literature'):

When we have learnt how to straighten out his twisted phrases, to leap his æry chasms of remote associations, to catch a prospect through his eyelet holes of intelligence to practise a certain legerdemain and keep five balls of meaning a-dance together in the brain—when we have learnt these various things and several others, then the total significance of Mr. Meredith as a poet is found to be good: is found to be sound and sweet and sane, seed for a hopeful sowing and clean wheat for our quern.

Of course, it may be said that the demands which Mr. Meredith makes of his readers are exorbitant, and that a difficult style is necessarily a bad style. A student of the history of literature, however, knows that the charge of obscurity, which is one of the charges most confidently brought by contemporaries, can be finally adjudicated on only by time. It may be sustained, or it may be refuted. To many of his contemporaries Gray was a tangle of difficulties; for critics of authority in a later period Wordsworth and Shelley and Coleridge wrote unintelligible nonsense; and in our own day we have seen the poetry of Robert Browning slowly but surely expounding itself to a generation. Even caviare, it seems, may become a little fly-blown. Perhaps Mr. Meredith's style is difficult; but difficulty is a relative term, and experience should have taught us that this is a point on which it is wise to reserve an absolute judgment. Sword-practice is difficult to those who have not exercised the muscles of the wrist; and some dancers who foot it merrily in the waltz stand grim against the wall looking condemnation at the lifted leg and pointed toe of the *pas de quatre*. If Mr. Meredith can teach young folk to dance to his music, the most reluctant of us will be forced to admit by and by that he has achieved what is the essential thing. . . .

In a dozen volumes of prose the eager student of human nature has told us of his discoveries. Prose is proved by the achievement of his forty years of authorship to be the main stream; verse is no more than a slender affluent. But both are *Dichtung*, and both, it may be added, are *Wahrheit*. Or, to vary our metaphor, the *Dichtung* written in prose is the lake, broad-bosomed, with countless coves and creeks; the *Dichtung* written in verse is a lakelet higher among the hills, less easy of access, but open to the skies and to the passage of the stars, though at times involved in wreathing mists; and a stream runs down from lakelet to lake, connecting the two—for Mr. Meredith's prose is at times such prose as a poet writes, and the thought and feeling expressed in his novels are fed from the contemplations of a poet. His subtlety and his analytic power have in the novels a wider range for play; his faith and hope are more directly expressed in his verse. In both prose and verse his felicities are found in infelicity—or what for the present seems such; his infelicities are found amid felicity; he is at once a most alluring and a most provoking writer.

Mr. Richard Le Gallienne in his well-known monograph describes most happily these provoking and alluring qualities of Meredith's prose, when he says :

He has more than one resemblance to Browning, but he undeniably has one, and that is at once the power and the disregard of form. That he has such power no one can doubt who has read his 'Modern Love,' 'The Meeting,' 'Phœbus with Admetus,' 'Melampus,' or 'Love in the Valley,' but that he no less often exhibits that disregard is unhappily equally certain. At the same time, that less perfect part of Mr. Meredith's poetry is not so as Wordsworth's barren patches are, it is far from barren indeed, it is full of song and flowers, though wild as wild; it is like a mass of rich yarn that awaits the weaver, full of threads of wondrous colour, but still yarn. And so it comes about that we cannot speak of Mr. Meredith's poetry as a whole, as we can of Wordsworth's, wherein division of unmistakable sheep and unmistakable goats is comparatively easy. To select the perfect and abide by that would not only be to leave out a good half of his work, which, whatever its imperfections, is yet full of beauty and power, but would also mean missing a certain peculiarity of flavour which these very poems alone possess. All Mr. Meredith's verse has imagination, music and colour, such as the great among the poets alone bring us, but not all has that orb'd completeness which can only come of form. Thus he may be said to give us more poetry than poems, and excepting 'Phœbus with Admetus,' 'Melampus' and one or two more, it would not, I think, be unjust, for the purpose of a broad division, to include all his nature-poetry under the former head. For they read too often like the first drafts of poems, loose in texture, and full of dropped stitches—here a line of masterly compression, there an inorganic stretch of twelve. It is poetry in the ore, all aglitter with gold, but the refiner has been lazy or indifferent. Yet gold it is, gold of Ophir.

The late James Ashcroft Noble was never a critic given to enthusiasms, so we need not be surprised to find him somewhat coldly critical of Meredith's poetry, but his observations are of real importance, and several passages from his essay which appeared in the first edition of Mr. A. H. Miles's admirable work 'The Poets and the Poetry of the Century,' are worthy of consideration :

In speaking of Mr. Meredith's poetry (he writes) the first thing needing to be said is that his prose achievement is a natural growth, while his work in verse is a product of deliberate choice. His speaking voice is an affair of organisation; his singing voice is the result of careful training. Some fervid devotees have had the temerity

to place him at the head of living novelists; no admirer, howsoever indiscriminating, would dare to place him even in the front rank of living poets; and yet the qualities which give to his work permanent interest and value are more clearly visible here and there in his verse than in any of his novels, save perhaps in one or two passages, such as the description of the early meetings of Richard Feverel and Lucy Desborough, where the form only is that of prose, while the emotional pitch and imaginative plane are the pitch and plane of poetry. Such a chapter as that entitled 'Ferdinand and Miranda' has the Miltonic essentials of poetry; it is simple, sensuous, passionate; and even a person of very moderate sensibility will be aware in reading it that he is in the presence of a writer with the poet's capacity of feeling and rendering, and possibly or probably, therefore, the poet's command of that medium of utterance in which such capacity naturally expresses itself. If, however, he turns from such a passage to one of Mr. Meredith's slim volumes of verse, his disappointment will probably be great and bitter, unless some rare guidance of happy fortune leads him to the small group of poems of which later on something must be said. Simplicity will reveal itself only too seldom, and though he will discern that sensuousness and passion are less scantily represented, he will often feel that they are so strenuously intellectualised, so tricked out in complexities of elaborated metaphor, as to be deprived of their essential character. . . .

There is much in Mr. Meredith's poetry that is strained, artificial, obscure; there is much that is strong, picturesque, penetrating, but his true individuality is made manifest most clearly and delightfully in those poems in which he deals with the sensuous side of Nature and the homelier conditions of unsophisticated human life. . . . He will never be a popular poet, and yet he has written poems which deserve the best kind of popularity.

Though this is criticism that rings hard and clear, like steel, and not soft and sweet as gold, it is quite true of its kind, and Ashcroft Noble indicates correctly wherein the true poetic Meredith reveals himself. He does not, however, as Mr. Le Gallienne very rightly does, lay stress on the unique character of all Meredith's nature-poetry. Says Mr. Le Gallienne:

The wonderful natural descriptions scattered broadcast over his novels are sufficient earnest of a power in the quality of which he is especially alone. For, his nature-poetry is indeed quite different from any other before known in English literature. And the difference lies in the fact that, while most other poets have sung of Nature in the abstract, have moralised, sentimentalised, transcendentalised her, Mr. Meredith has cared more to sing her as she is in the concrete. His predecessors have, in the main, sung the



[From the drawing by Sir John Millais  
in 'Once a Week']

#### THE CROWN OF LOVE

Unhalting he must bear her on,  
Not pause a space to gather breath,  
And on the height she would be won,  
And she was won in death!

—George Meredith





pirit of Nature; he sings her body, which is the earth, as well—this Earth of the beautiful breasts.' . . . He sings of Nature, not because he worships her in some vague way afar off, as one might the abstract Woman, but because he has loved and worshipped her as a man his wife, lying in her arms, eye to eye, breath to breath. He has lived with her day by day for many years, he knows all her moods, moods of summer and winter, of joy and travail, strange moods of contradiction hard to bear, and yet alike in one as in another he has never lost his faith that her heart is love—'love, the great volcano.'

It will not be denied that Mr. Le Gallienne here utters sober criticism though its terms are those of frank appreciation. Ashcroft Noble is perhaps too timid of praise though he is never unjust. 'Whenever Mr. Meredith is content to feel Nature rather than to analyse her, he reveals himself as a seer whose every glance is unerring, a singer whose every note is clear and true.' So he thinks, and most critics will endorse his judgment. In the following passage it will be seen that Noble is really at one with Mr. Le Gallienne in the strict letter of criticism, but just escapes being warmed by contact with the poet:

Such poems, or portions of such poems, as 'The Woods of Westernmain,' 'The Lark Ascending,' 'Hard Weather,' 'Autumn Even-Song,' to name only four out of many, stand almost alone in modern poetry. Various English poets, for example, have sung of the skylark, but in all of them—with, perhaps, the solitary exception of Hogg—the bird has been more or less spiritualised or moralised: the actual theme has been charged with, and sometimes almost overlaid by, a burden of ethical or intellectual significance supplied by the mind of the human singer rather than inevitably suggested by the mounting minstrel of the sky. Towards the close of the poem just named, Mr. Meredith, like Shelley and Wordsworth, uses the lark as a text for a discourse not less true and beautiful than theirs; but in the earlier verses, he sees, hears, feels the object as in itself it really is, and renders it with an opulence of sensuous and emotional realisation which his predecessors with all their magic fail to achieve. Their poems are lovely; each of them is, indeed, in its own way perfect; but if a man who had never heard the skylark longed to know all the words that could tell him of the rippling rapture of the marvellous music of the air, his lack of one of the most exquisite of all the joys of sense would be supplied more inadequately—or perhaps one ought to say less inadequately—by Mr. Meredith than by either Wordsworth or Shelley. Hogg comes nearer to the bird, but his bounding lyric, fine as it is, might have been written of rumour rather than of the close-loving know-

ledge, the very absorption of intimacy, which makes itself manifest in every phrase of a song which is itself lark-like.

One of the most charming pieces ever written about Meredith is from the pen of Mr. A. T. Quiller-Couch, and appears in that unique and delightful book 'From a Cornish Window.' It is there given in the form of a racy dialogue between the author and a literary friend, and if, in selecting a brief page or two, I may have sought to preserve its value as criticism at the expense of its charm as witty colloquy, Mr. Quiller-Couch will doubtless forgive me for the end I have in view :

Meredith, if a true poet, is also and undeniably a hard one : and a poet must not only preach but persuade. 'He dooth not only show the way,' says Sidney, 'but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way as will entice any man to enter into it.' . . .

Is Mr. Meredith a persuasive poet? . . . He can be—let us grant—a plaguily forbidding one. His philosophy is not easy; yet it seems to me a deal easier than many of his single verses. I hope humbly, for instance, one of these days, to discover what is meant by such a verse as this :

Thou animatest ancient tales,  
To prove our world of linear seed;  
Thy very virtue now assails  
A tempter to mislead.

Faint, yet pursuing, I hope; but I must admit that such writing does not obviously allure, that it rather dejects the student by the difficulty of finding a stool to sit down and be stoical on. 'Nay,' to parody Sidney, 'he dooth as if your journey should lye through a fayre Vineyard, at the first give you a handful of nuts, forgetting the nut-crackers.' He is, in short, half his time forbiddingly difficult, and at times to all appearances so deliberately and yet so wantonly difficult, that you wonder what on earth you came out to pursue and why you should be tearing your flesh in these thickets.

And then you remember the swinging cadences of 'Love in the Valley'—the loveliest love-song of its century . . . And you swear that no thickets can be so dense but you will wrestle through them in the hope of hearing that voice again, or even an echo of it.

'Melampus,' 'The Nuptials of Attila,' 'The Day of the Daughter of Hades,' 'The Empty Purse,' 'Jump-to-Glory Jane,' and the splendid 'Phœbus with Admetus,'—you come back to each again and again, compelled by the wizardry of single lines and by a certain separate glamour which hangs about each of them. Each of them is remembered by you as in its own way a superb performance; lines here and there so haunt you with their beauty that you must go back and read the whole poem over for the sake of them. Other

lines you boggle over, and yet cannot forget them; you hope to like them better at the next reading; you re-read, and wish them away, yet find them, liked or disliked, so embedded in your memory that you cannot do without them. Take, for instance, the last stanza of 'Phœbus with Admetus':

You with shelly horns, rams! and promontory goats,  
 You whose browsing beards dip in coldest dew!  
 Bulls that walk the pasture in kingly-flashing coats!  
 Laurel, ivy, vine, wreathed for feasts not few!  
 You that build the shade-roof, and you that court the rays,  
 You that leap besprinkling the rock stream-rent;  
 He has been our fellow, the morning of our days;  
 Us he chose for house-mates, and this way went.

The first thing that made this stanza unforgettable was the glorious third line: almost as soon 'promontory goats' fastened itself on memory; and almost as soon the last two lines were perceived to be excellent, and the fourth also. These enforced you, for the pleasure of recalling them, to recall the whole, and so of necessity to be hospitably minded towards the fifth and sixth lines, which at first repelled as being too obscurely and almost fantastically expressed. Having once passed in, I find 'You that leap besprinkling the rock stream-rent,' with its delicate labial pause and its delicate consonantal chime, one of the most fascinating lines in the stanza. And since, after being the hardest of all to admit, it has become one of the best liked, I am forced in fairness to ask myself if hundreds of lines of Mr. Meredith's which now seem crabbed or fantastic may not justify themselves after many readings.

Mr. Quiller-Couch here writes in the true spirit about Meredith's 'obscurity.' Let us always remember that the critics who are most conscious of the poet's defects are those most alive to his merits.

Mr. Macaulay Trevelyan's ingenious description (in 'The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith') of how the taste for Meredith's poetry grows on one, is no doubt a record of personal experience, and it is an experience probably general to all the discerning students of the poet. Devoid of all appeals to the popular taste, there is no way else in which his poetry could possibly reach its mark, but for this very reason, once the mark is reached, the work of no other poet can so intimately touch the soul of the reader, none so haunt his ear with fresh, strange melody, in which 'the incommunicable' is by the subtle magic of words conveyed to the receptive mind. Perhaps enough has been said in general in respect to the poet's witchery of words. The criticism of his prose style is, with no great modifications, applicable to his poetry. His use of

metaphor is no whit more pronounced, unless it be that the compression of poetry brings one metaphor on the heels of another more quickly than in prose. Mr. Trevelyan characterises very neatly the danger of trying to follow the Meredithian metaphor, in terms which are Meredithian, when he says: 'You are meant to catch the first light that flies off the metaphor as it passes; but if you seize and cling to it, as though it were a post, you will be drowned in the flood of fresh metaphor that follows.' There is no sequence of imagery in the poetry, and he who attempts to read it as an orderly progression is doomed to disappointment and happily so, for its magistral power is derived in large part from the white heat of the words and phrases in which the poet beats out his meaning with splendid swinging hammer-strokes and none too mindful of the sparks that fly off in the process. What Mr. Trevelyan calls 'foreshortening' of phrase, whereby the effect is achieved by a minimum of words, is illustrated in these lines from 'The Young Princess':

All cloaked and masked, with naked blades,  
That flashed of a judgment done,  
The lords of the Court, from the palace-door,  
Came issuing silently, bearers four,  
And flat on their shoulders one.

It is thus that the other lords have fulfilled the lady's word.—'Flat on their shoulders one' (says Mr. Trevelyan) is a memorable instance of Mr. Meredith's foreshortening method. The unessential has been most emphatically banished from the line, and yet it leaves nothing more to be asked or explained. Like the blow of the Matadore, it makes an end.

Our attention will now turn from the general to the particular, that we may see in the criticism of his most characteristic poems what are those qualities it has been found so difficult to express in general terms, chiefly for lack of standards of comparison.

We are already familiar with Kingsley's and Mr. W. M. Rossetti's reviews of the 'Poems' of 1851, to which some attention has been devoted in an earlier chapter. Perhaps it is surprising that in all the later criticism of Meredith's poetry so little has been written about his earliest verse. 'Modern Love' is the favourite starting-point. The tendency has been to dismiss the first collection as mere juvenilia, and this was induced perhaps by the work being so long unobtainable: more than forty years elapsed before its contents were reprinted in the collected edition of the works, issued in 1896-98. The poet's later revision of 'Love in the

Valley'—misnamed in scores of books and reviews 'Love in a Valley'—has frequently been regretted, and some day the first version may be restored. It is of that, most probably, that one of Leslie Stephen's daughters is speaking in this note from Maitland's 'Life and Letters' of her father:

He loved, too, and knew by heart since he had first read it, George Meredith's 'Love in the Valley,' and he made us remark—and this was a rare instance of its kind—the beauty of Mr. Meredith's metres and his mastery over them. As a rule he disliked criticism of technical qualities, and, indeed, disliked being drawn into criticisms of any kind.

York Powell may **not** have been referring to the first version when he wrote in a letter to Professor Oliver Elton, his biographer, touching an essay of the latter on Meredith:

You must specially praise 'Love in a Valley,' the most gorgeous piece of rhythmical work and passion. You have left it out. Meredith is a **great** metrist, but Browning writes poorly as regards musical verse. Meredith has *invented* his great metres.

Stevenson, likewise, would probably be more familiar with the later form of 'Love in the Valley,' of which he wrote from Vailima to Mr. W. B. Yeats, in April, 1894:

Long since when I was a boy I remember the emotions with which I repeated Swinburne's poems and ballads. Some ten years ago a similar spell was cast upon me by Meredith's 'Love in the Valley'; the stanzas beginning 'When her mother tends her' haunted me and made me drunk like wine, and I remember waking with them all the echoes of the hills about Hyères.

But Turner Palgrave in his personal recollections of Tennyson, contributed to the present Lord Tennyson's 'Life' of his father, leaves us in no doubt that it was the 1851 text of the poem that delighted Tennyson, and evidently disapproves of the altered form of thirty years later. Beyond the notable criticisms quoted in the chapter on 'Early Appreciations' little of importance has been written on the 1851 volume, and when we arrive at later criticism of 'Love in the Valley' we shall find it is always the version appearing in 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' that is in question.

Of 'Modern Love' there is abundance of excellent criticisms. Mr. Swinburne's famous letter to the *Spectator* has been given earlier in the present work. It is from it that Professor Dowden

quotes in the following note which I take from his study of 'Mr. Meredith in his Poems':

The most important document in the study of the human heart which Mr. Meredith has given us in verse is doubtless 'Modern Love.' 'Praise or blame,' wrote Mr. Swinburne, 'should be thoughtful, serious, careful, when applied to a work of such subtle strength, such depth of delicate power, such passionate and various beauty' as this. Praise or blame seems each equally needless now; the poem has taken its place; there it is, and there it will remain. The critic's complaint that 'Modern Love' deals with a deep and painful subject on which Mr. Meredith has no conviction to express, was a natural outbreak of human infirmity; we all like to have the issues of a difficult case made clear; we all like to have a problem worked out to its solution. But in art, as in life, it is not always good policy to snatch at a near advantage:

Oh! if we draw a circle premature,  
Heedless of far gain,  
Greedy for quick returns of profit, sure,  
Bad is our bargain!

Sometimes it is more for our good that art should put a question courageously than that it should propose some petty answer to the question. In 'Modern Love,' if Mr. Meredith does not prescribe a remedy for the disease of marriage perverted from its true ends—unless that remedy be the general one of more brain, and so more spirit, more righteousness, more beneficence—he at least makes a careful diagnosis of the case. It is something to describe the phases of the malady, and to issue no advertisement of a quack nostrum. And in that silence which precedes one last low cry—'Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!' does not Mr. Meredith make us feel, with a sense too deep for tears, how Pity pleads for Sin? and is not this something as helpful to us as if he had expressed 'a conviction on a painful subject'?

The earliest study of Meredith's poetry as a whole dates back only some twenty years, and was from the skilled and sympathetic pen of Mr. Arthur Symonds, the medium of its publication being, appropriately enough, the *Westminster Review*, of September, 1887. In this Mr. Symonds writes as follows concerning 'Modern Love':

Mr. Meredith's longest poem is also, beyond a shadow of doubt (so it seems to us), by far his best work in verse. . . . We have never been able to tell quite what it is that gives to these sonnet-like stanzas (with all their obscurities of allusion and their occasional faults in versification) a certain charm and power which fascinate and fasten upon mind and memory at once. Mr. Meredith has



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### THE LAST WORDS OF DUGGING, FERRY

I am more ill in the noon, now I feel it  
All the oil leath' springs. Aint it strange  
Th' re - the world laughin' as if to mock at it  
But He is laughin' the hange - - -





never done anything else like it; this wonderful style, acid, stinging, bitter-sweet, poignant, as if fashioned of the very moods of these 'modern loves,' reappears in no other poem (except faintly in the 'Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt'). The poem stands alone, not merely in Mr. Meredith's work, but in all antecedent literature. It is altogether a new thing; we venture to call it the most 'modern' poem we have.

'Modern Love' is a poem of the drawing-rooms; it is tinged throughout with irony; it moves by 'tragic hints.' In the same volume we have a group of 'Poems of the English Roadside,' studies, as they are also termed, of 'Roadside Philosophers.' Here we are in a new atmosphere altogether, an atmosphere in which we can breathe more freely, under the open sky, upon the road and the heath. This little group of homely poems, to which should be added 'Martin's Puzzle,' a poem of the same period, seems to us, after 'Modern Love,' perhaps the most original and satisfying contribution made by Mr. Meredith to the poetry of his time. One poem, at least, is an absolute masterpiece, and of its kind it is almost without a rival. There is a sly and kindly humour in 'The Beggar's Soliloquy,' a quaint wit in 'The Old Chartist,' a humorous wisdom tinged with pathos in 'Martin's Puzzle'; each of these poems is a greater or less success in a line of work which is much more difficult than it looks; but 'Juggling Jerry,' notwithstanding a flaw here and there in the rhythm, quickens our blood and strikes straight from the heart to the heart as only a few poems here and there can do. We said that of its kind it is almost without a rival; we may say, indeed, quite without a rival, outside Burns.

Personally, it is a pleasure to me to find so subtle a critic of poetry as Mr. Arthur Symonds enthusiastic for 'Juggling Jerry' when I remember Mr. Le Gallienne's somewhat slighting references to the simple, guileless folk who can admire Meredith in such a vein and think him by that token great. Mr. Le Gallienne is so good a critic himself, discounting always his tendency to let enthusiasm sway his pen at times, that it may seem ungracious to say he is apt to admire the uncommon more because it is uncommon than because it is good. I mean that anything unconventional would receive a welcome from him before he had inquired into its other merits. Admirers of 'Juggling Jerry' need not be disappointed that he is cold to them; and they may approve what he has to say of 'Modern Love' none the less because they would expect it to make peculiar appeal to his tastes. He writes of it in these terms:

'Modern Love' is the one poem of closest kin to Shakespeare's sonnets. The kinship is hardly in the form, which is, without exception, composed of four Petrarchian quatrains, each independent in

respect of rhymes; nor is it merely in the 'Shakespearian ring' of the verse. That is a trick soon learnt, and may mean something or nothing. It is simply in 'the fundamental brainwork,' which one feels alive through every line and word of the poem, the spaciousness and strength of the imagination revealed to us by that greatness of metaphor, and that compression of phrase, which marks all great literary art. . . . The last quatrain of the poem alone, if nought else were left, should witness a master. Whether or not the kinship to Shakespeare's sonnets seems a real one to others, or whether it is but an eccentricity of my own judgment, is of little moment; it is only important that 'Modern Love' should be recognised as a great poem of 'tragic life.'

Mr. Le Gallienne's is the voice of the enthusiast; but the late Ashcroft Noble, who had none of the younger man's poetic fervour, or at least never let that flush his criticism, formed a very different opinion of 'Modern Love.' After giving a clear and concise summary of the theme of the poem he declared that 'the dramatic motive is far fetched and fantastic, with no recognisable hold upon the actualities of human nature.' He continues:

The poem as a whole is a morbid conception embodied by a huddling together of strangled metaphors and hints for epigrams. It is all strain, there is no repose; it lacks the satisfying quality of adequate final expression. When not incompetent critics speak of 'Modern Love' as its author's masterpiece, they deliver themselves of a judgment which is not only fantastic but injurious, because it tends to divert attention from other work which has the very charms of healthy emotion, clear vision, and simple rendering which are here so conspicuously deficient.

Ashcroft Noble has here in mind the aforesaid strictures of Mr. Le Gallienne on those who venture to admire 'Juggling Jerry' and some other of the 'Poems of the English Roadside,' in which unquestionably 'both the matter and the manner are of universal interest,' and so make the universal appeal.

Such universality (says Noble) can be predicated of 'Juggling Jerry,' as it cannot be predicated of 'Modern Love,' and in virtue of it the former poem stands upon a higher plane. The old juggle represents a type so broadly human that it has been, is, and will be familiar to every country and to every age; he may, indeed without exaggeration be called Homeric, for he is a homely Odysseu who has had his life of wandering, has looked upon the world with shrewd, open eyes, and has acquired the simple wisdom of such a experience. . . .



N w what i n trow a ther rat ab ut,  
 Wh vates h s l l pol with b s J iws  
 It hie lefym all ur i a ur a l l a v  
 For him t hoi l e l l get cl an by t  
 I never fou l t t r u e a i e n o c i a l  
 B i s e c u l t u r  
 c a n t r l a n f y o u r o w n e s t e m o l l i t  
 I l l t r e a h a v u t t h e B r i t i s h n a t i o n  
 — — — — —  
 t e h e d i f



Yonder came smells of the gorse, so nutty,  
 Goldlike and warm: it's the prime of May.  
 Better than mortar, brick, and putty,  
 Is God's house on a blowing day.  
 Lean me more up the mound; now I feel it:  
 All the old heath-smells! Ain't it strange?  
 There's the world laughing as if to conceal it,  
 But He is by us, juggling the change.

Whether it be 'incommunicable' or not there is something in such a stanza as this—a fulness of life, a keenness of sensation, and ecstasy of simple human enjoyment—which makes some of us feel that we would rather have written it than we would have written all the recondite verses which the coteries hug as their peculiar possession.

Touching the verse form of 'Modern Love,' the late York Powell, in a letter to Professor Oliver Elton, discussing Meredith's poetry, says: 'Don't say (of "Modern Love") "misnamed sonnets." The Elizabethans would have called them "sonnets." They are not Petrarchian sonnets, but that doesn't matter. "There is a glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon."'

'Modern Love' appeared in 1862 and 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' in 1883: a gap of twenty years in which the poet had published no collection of his verse. The new book had a splendid reception, and among the notable critics who hailed it were Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton, Mrs. Alice Meynell, the late Mark Pattison, and Mr. W. L. Courtney. In the *Athenæum*, July 23, 1883, Mr. Watts-Dunton reviewed the new book with the finely balanced enthusiasm of the clear-minded critic. One could wish to quote his article at some length, so rich is it in allusiveness and wise exposition of the poetic art, for Mr. Watts-Dunton never writes of any particular book without taking his reader on a voyage of discovery whence he returns laden with new treasures of literary knowledge. But here we must confine our attention to his opinion of Meredith, whose 'Poems and Lyrics' he hails with the words: 'It is a comfort to find at last a poet who can sing "The Joy of Earth."' After showing how so many try to sing its misery or merely to voice their own emotions, never coming within sight of the elemental, while others, and even of the great, tune their lyres in the orchestra of 'Nowhere,' imitating Shelley's example of 'soaring away into cloudy regions' instead of singing from 'Somewhere' and giving to abstractions a concrete poetic form, Mr. Watts-Dunton goes on to say:

All that the poet has to do with abstractions, though he had always much better leave them alone, is to do as Shakespeare does—take them and turn them into concretions; for the artist is simply the man who by instinct embodies in concrete forms that which is essential and elemental in nature and in man, the poetic artist being he who by instinct chooses for his concrete forms musical language. And the questions to be asked concerning any work of art are simply these: Is that which is embodied really elemental? and is the concrete form embodying it really beautiful? Any other question is an impertinence. 'Somewhere' being the poet's home, the most awkward results naturally follow if the poet wanders, as so many of our contemporary poets do wander, into 'Nowhere,' the most unpleasant of these results being that when he comes to address us he can sing about nothing and nobody but himself; whereas his highest duty as a singer, to say nothing of his duty as a gentleman, is to keep himself modestly in the background and sing about other people. Mr. Meredith recognises this fact in the most beautiful poem of his volume—'The Lark Ascending.'

Still, Mr. Meredith should bear in mind that he who would sing to us of the joy of earth should first make sure that he has a good voice for singing. Throughout the entire animal kingdom there is, it seems, no subject upon which a vocalist is so apt to deceive himself as upon the quality of his voice. 'It is given to the very frogs,' says Pascal, 'to find music in their own croaking'; and no doubt the looks of self-satisfaction on the face of a croaking frog is scarcely to be matched in nature. Nor, we may rest assured, is there one among the countless verse-mongers of our time who does not find a music in his own lines delightful to himself, though perhaps undiscoverable to other and shorter ears than his own. But the singer of the 'joy of earth' requires a voice of such exceptional power and sweetness that partial failure in such a song should be called partial success.

The descriptions in the first poem in the volume, 'The Woods of Westernmain,' are exceedingly vivid and beautiful. . . .

On the whole, the most important poem in the volume is 'The Day of the Daughter of Hades.' Mr. Meredith seems to have an ear for iambic rather than for anapæstic movements, though, for some reason or another, he seems fond of writing in anapæsts. There is no more clear and sharp distinction between poets than that which divides them between poets who have the iambic ear and poets who have the anapæstic. While writers like Keats and Wordsworth in passing from the iambic to the anapæstic movement pass at once into doggerel, writers like Shelley and Mr. Swinburn are so entirely at home in anapæstic movements that even their iambic lines seem always on the verge of leaping into the anapæstic dance.

If verse were simply quintessential prose, then assuredly Mr. Meredith would be one of the most effective poets living. In the art of 'packing a line' he is almost without living equal. Take the following stanzas from the poem called 'Earth and Man':

He may entreat, aspire,  
He may despair, and she has never heed  
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,  
Not his desire.

*She prompts him to rejoice,  
Yet scares him on the threshold with the shroud.*  
He deems her cherishing of her best—endowed  
A wanton's choice.

The two lines italicised are much more than quintessential prose, they are poetry worthy of almost any writer in the English language. But the line which follows them is metrically bad, and bad in the worst way, for it shows that he whose natural instinct, judging from the sonnets in the volume, is to avoid elision and to spread out the syllables of his lines after Keats's fashion, attempts an elision here without having the slightest notion of what is the true nature and function of elision in poetry. And throughout the book there are lines which strike upon the ear like flints:

She fancied; armed beyond beauty, and thence grew.  
In mind only, and the perils that ensue.  
Hear, then, my friend, madam! Tongue-restrained he stands.

Still, notwithstanding all the rugged lines in this volume, such a poem as 'The Lark Ascending' is enough to show that Mr. Meredith has a true call to express himself in metre. And this is no faint praise, for among those who express, or endeavour to express, themselves in metre, how many have really a call to do so?

Mr. Watts-Dunton concludes his brilliant study by quoting 'The Orchard and the Heath,' of which he says: 'Here the picture is brilliant, the suggested lesson of life healthy, manly, and bracing, and the metrical music as good, perhaps, as Mr. Meredith has achieved.' And his final verdict on 'Poems and Lyrics' is: 'Manliness and intellectual vigour combined with a remarkable picturesqueness are the most noticeable qualities of his volume.'

Mark Pattison, who reviewed the volume of 1883 with even greater intentness on Meredith, bore a name that will be long remembered in the world of scholars, and a criticism from his pen is to-day of the utmost value. To the *Academy*, July 21, 1883, he contributed a most careful review of considerable length, and from this I take several passages with which students of the poetry should be familiar:



What is true of a whole poetic career is also true of any volume of collected pieces composed at long intervals. No one, not even a critic, is always at his best. But in poetry we may go further, and say that the best of any poet is so rare and costly that it is indeed *paucorum horarum*. . . .

It is, therefore, no disparagement to say of the poems in the present volume that they are unequal in poetic merit. They all have the Meredithian quality, but in varying degrees of perfection. They are all out of the same vineyard, but of different vintages. To come to details. 'Love in the Valley,' *e. g.* does not rise in general conception and design above the average level of the 'minor poet' as we know him. For this reason it will probably be one of the most popular. It has also the ordinary fault of the modern English poetry—diffuseness, the beating out of a small particle of metal into too thin foil. Yet 'Love in the Valley' is redeemed from commonness by single strokes which are not within the reach of everyday, as well as by a vigour of language which is Mr. Meredith's own property among all his competitors. Take this stanza, descriptive of morning light :

Happy, happy time, when the white star hovers  
 Low over dim fields fresh with bloomy dew,  
 Near the face of dawn, that shows athwart the darkness,  
 Threading it with colour, like yewberries the yew.  
 Thicker crowd the shades as the grave East deepens  
 Glowing, and with crimson a long cloud swells.  
 Maiden still the morn is ; and strange she is, and secret ;  
 Strange her eyes ; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells

I do not defend 'bloomy' here said of dew. Mr. Meredith might have learned the meaning of 'bloomy' from Milton, who uses it properly of the spray bursting into leaf in an English April. To apply 'bloomy' to dew is too like that displacement of epithet which is one of the tricks by which the modern school of poets seeks to supply a spurious originality.

'The Day of the Daughter of Hades' is also liable to the charge of diffuseness. And it has the more serious fault of being a versified treatment of a legend provided by the Greek mythology. . . . The nineteenth-century poetical reader knows nothing of Grecian Sicily. It is superadding another difficulty, which is superfluous, to one which is inherent in the nature of the case. We have to make a separate effort to get together the Greek imagery, in addition to the effort which all poetry demands of passing beyond the stereotype forms of everyday life to the spirit within them.

The piece which gives its character to the volume, and raises the whole above the average of the reproductions of Rossetti with which we are familiar, is the first, which is entitled 'The Wood of Westernmain.' This piece seizes the imagination with a power which the vague and rather featureless 'Daughter of Hades' does not possess. Many poets have signalled the romance that lies i

forest depths, the 'calling shapes and beckoning shadows.' No poetical forest has surpassed in wealth of suggestion 'the woods of Westernmain.' In these woods is no wizardry; no supernatural agents are at work. But if you enter them with a poet's eye and a poet's sensibility you may see and hear that natural magic which surpasses all the fictitious tales of sorcerers, witches, wood gods, of Fauns and Dryads. The poem teaches, not didactically—for nothing is farther from its form or its thought than the inculcation of doctrine—how what we see depends upon what we are. . . . The doctrine is old enough; the psychology of religion and that of poetry agree in it. . . . It is wholly in your power what you shall make of earth. As you choose to look, she is either a dust-filled tomb or radiant with the blush of morning. Gaze under, and the soul is rich past computing. You must not only look, you must put off yourself, sink your individuality, you must let her 'two-sexed meanings melt through you, wed the thought.' Your rich reward will not only be in the power of understanding, but in a quickening joy, the 'joy of earth' showered upon you without a stint. In contrast with the pessimistic tone and despairing notes of the modern school, Mr. Meredith offers 'a song of gladness,' and smiles with Shakespeare at a generation 'ranked in gloomy noddings over life.'

Mrs. Alice Meynell, the foremost woman poet of our time, and a rare critic of poetry, does not agree with Pattison in his opinion of 'The Day of the Daughter of Hades'; and while no less an admirer of Meredith's poetry, she has a charge against it of a graver nature than inelegance of compound words, which Pattison, in common with many other critics, has esteemed one of the poet's besetting sins. Mrs. Meynell reviewed 'Poems and Lyrics' in *Merry England*, August, 1883, and though her observations were brief they stand high in the criticism of Meredith's poetry.

There are no disheartening shortcomings or boundaries in these large and vigorous poems (writes Mrs. Meynell). If every poet must have one of two demerits—faults or limitations—Mr. Meredith is to be congratulated on having faults, and not limitations. To our mind the possession of faults is preferable to that of limitations. At times he frees his reader's thought, sets him above the poverties of time and place, and asks him, as Virgil asked Dante in an eternal world, '*Che pensi?*' 'What thinkest thou?'

We have said that this is one of the more fortunate poets who have faults. The principal of these in his case is obscurity, seldom if ever unconquerable by a little application, but sometimes profound at the first glance. Again, Mr. Meredith has a way, which many must find distasteful, of overworking a simile too precisely and insistently. This is an instance:

'Spiral,' the memorable lady terms  
 Our minds' ascent: our world's advance presents  
 That figure on a flat; the way of worms.

By the way, who is the lady quoted, Will any of our readers tell us? The saying sounds like one of George Eliot's, though we do not remember it in her writings. With regard to metrical form, it is to be noted that Mr. Meredith uses quantity in a manner unusual in English or any modern verse. Those of his poems in which this peculiarity occurs should be read in time as music is sung. Negroes would recite them to perfection. He evidently doubts his white readers' comprehension of rhythm intended, for he gives a guide to the scansion. This is a specimen of lines in which quantity plays this important part:

Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping  
 Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.

This is indeed *tempo marcato*; and we cannot but think the insistent rhythm is undignified. To thresh to, to march to, to rock or dance a baby to, quantitative verse is all very well; but accent is sufficient for poetry which is read in repose.

The fourth of the noteworthy criticisms of 'Poems and Lyrics' mentioned above was from the pen of Mr. W. L. Courtney, and occurred in the course of his article on 'Poets of To-day' in the *Fortnightly*, November, 1883. Mr. Courtney is one of our most scholarly writers on literature, little given to the personal in the expression of his opinion, but a scholar of a different range, of course, from so remarkable a man as Pattison. Yet we have to note that from the detached and austere standpoint of impersonal criticism the one singles out for praise the very poem which the other stigmatises as the work of the average 'minor poet' and 'for this reason it will probably be the most popular.' Mr. Courtney writes as follows:

Mr. Meredith describes the main theme of his 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' in one of his sonnets.

I say but that this love of Earth reveals  
 A soul beside our own, to quicken, quell,  
 Irradiate, and through ruinous floods uplift.

This soul of Nature he tries to find with an ardour almost as great as that of Wordsworth, but with a totally different result. For '*Natura non nisi parendo vincitur*,' and the soul of Mr. Meredith, which reflects the soul of things outside, is a *speculum inæquale*, too full of artificiality, of poetic conceits, of far-fetched circumlocutions and periphrases, to mirror with perfect fidelity the difficult

simplicity of Nature. 'O good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth!'—Mr. Browning is not especially a poet of Nature, but no one could better give us that attitude of patient receptivity of natural influence, in the absence of which Mr. Meredith will never make us feel the reality of his Nature-worship. In every way these poems are worthy of the author of 'The Egoist' and 'The Tragic Comedians'—that is to say, they give the same impression of cold brilliancy, of epigram and antithesis, and absence of native simplicity and warmth. Few readers will peruse with pleasure the more difficult poems in this book, 'The Woods of Westermain' and 'Earth and Man'; while the sonnets at the end of the volume, though often ingenious, are rarely musical, and sometimes the lines are more than difficult to scan. On the other hand, nothing but praise should be accorded to the beautiful pastoral 'Love in the Valley,' with its racy, exhilarating metre; and there are parts of 'The Lark Ascending' which breathe the true spirit of poetic rapture. If only Mr. Meredith would make an effort to acquire what he describes in the lark's music, 'a song seraphically free of taint of personality,' he would be a better artist and a sweeter singer.

In the face of Mrs. Meynell's complaint as to the technical quality of 'Love in the Valley,' Pattison's dismissal of it as 'minor poetry,' Mr. Swinburne's description of it as 'the finest love-song of the century,' and Mr. Courtney's opinion above quoted, one may ask again, What is the plain man to think? The plain man will most probably come under the spell of its strangely sweet and swinging cadences, and prefer it to anything else in the volume, saving 'The Lark Ascending.' He will have Tennyson, Stevenson, Leslie Stephen, and many another famous name to quote in defence of his admiring the simple and unrestrained beauty of that pastoral, and in the lapse of time plain man and critic alike will be reading 'Love in the Valley' and 'Juggling Jerry' when the dilettante may have forgotten Meredith altogether in the discovery of some new genius whom the common herd have not had the sense to understand, for your true dilettante loses interest in his idol the moment he sees the handful of devotees swell into a throng.

'Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life,' in 1887, does not seem to have aroused so much interest among the critics as the collection of four years earlier. But Henley wrote at least two reviews of the new volume: one in the *Athenæum* and another in the *Saturday Review*, both of June 11, 1887, in which he said the same things in ingeniously different phrases. Nor can 'A Reading of Earth,' which appeared the year after 'Ballads and Poems,' be said to have produced any commotion in criticism. The only criticism of real note

'Spiral,' the memorable lady terms  
 Our minds' ascent: our world's advance presents  
 That figure on a flat; the way of worms.

By the way, who is the lady quoted, Will any of our readers tell us? The saying sounds like one of George Eliot's, though we do not remember it in her writings. With regard to metrical form, it is to be noted that Mr. Meredith uses quantity in a manner unusual in English or any modern verse. Those of his poems in which this peculiarity occurs should be read in time as music is sung. Negroes would recite them to perfection. He evidently doubts his white readers' comprehension of rhythm intended, for he gives a guide to the scansion. This is a specimen of lines in which quantity plays this important part:

Lovely are the curves of the white owl sweeping  
 Wavy in the dusk lit by one large star.

This is indeed *tempo marcato*; and we cannot but think the insistent rhythm is undignified. To thresh to, to march to, to rock or dance a baby to, quantitative verse is all very well; but accent is sufficient for poetry which is read in repose.

The fourth of the noteworthy criticisms of 'Poems and Lyrics' mentioned above was from the pen of Mr. W. L. Courtney, and occurred in the course of his article on 'Poets of To-day' in the *Fortnightly*, November, 1883. Mr. Courtney is one of our most scholarly writers on literature, little given to the personal in the expression of his opinion, but a scholar of a different range, of course, from so remarkable a man as Pattison. Yet we have to note that from the detached and austere standpoint of impersonal criticism the one singles out for praise the very poem which the other stigmatises as the work of the average 'minor poet' and 'for this reason it will probably be the most popular.' Mr. Courtney writes as follows:

Mr. Meredith describes the main theme of his 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' in one of his sonnets.

I say but that this love of Earth reveals  
 A soul beside our own, to quicken, quell,  
 Irradiate, and through ruinous floods uplift.

This soul of Nature he tries to find with an ardour almost as great as that of Wordsworth, but with a totally different result. For '*Natura non nisi parendo vincitur*,' and the soul of Mr. Meredith, which reflects the soul of things outside, is a *speculum inæquale*, too full of artificiality, of poetic conceits, of far-fetched circumlocutions and periphrases, to mirror with perfect fidelity the difficult

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devoted to this book of verse was that by the late William Sharp in the *Scottish Art Review*, February 4, 1889. Sharp begins with a very reasonable denunciation of that criticism of Meredith's poetry which seeks to establish such distinctions as 'a writer of poetry, who has never written a poem,' or 'a great poet without music,' and with the other sort that strives to establish likeness or contrast between this or that poet and Meredith. He has no difficulty, of course, in illustrating how gloriously musical Meredith may be—quoting 'that most exquisite couplet':

Maiden still the morn is; and strange she is, and secret;  
Strange her eyes; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells—

nor in showing that he can write a poem as well as poetry, that he has concrete beauty not less than visions of the abstract, and equally how foolish it is to compare him with others instead of judging him by his own standards, the only true way of criticism. Applying himself to the poems of 1888 in particular, William Sharp sets forth his views in these words:

In 'A Reading of Earth' there is, it would seem to be necessary to say, ample proof that the quality of music is in no abeyance. It must of course be remembered that Mr. Meredith is not content to make a sweet sound about nothing; if he did so desire, it would probably be of little avail, for it is undeniable that his poetic work does not in the main possess a certain charm, that of rhythmic spontaneity. He is not a singer for the sake of singing, so much as a poet for the sake of poetry. There are thoughts and aspirations which he prefers to give forth in verse, concepts of abstract, renderings and interpretations of concrete beauty for which he cannot adequately or even aptly find expression in prose; but the passion of song, for song's sake, irrespective of its significance, does not seem to be his. It is difficult to say what is and what is not his dominant impulse; for, above all writers of the day, he has his falcon of poetry as much as his steed of prose in magic restraint—and we may be sure that so conscientious and so thorough an artist does not practise renunciation unless to some high end of art. . . . That Mr. Meredith would have attained as relatively high, or higher, a rank as a poet as he has done of a novelist, had he devoted himself absolutely to the art which he indubitably loves so well, and has, indeed, long so loyally served, I feel well assured. . . .

It will be safe to predict that few readers of this book will repeat the echo-cry about lack of music. Music of utterance, happy epithets, and felicities of selection where natural description is concerned, abound. 'The South-Western' is the finest of poems to the true lord of all the winds that blow. 'Mother to Babe,' 'Woodland Peace,' 'Outer and Inner,' with its sweet complexities of rhyme







and metre, and the 'Dirge in Woods,' are among the most delightful of the shorter poems. The last-named was written, and in an extended form published, some nineteen years ago; and it was, as Rossetti himself told me, the direct progenitor of his lyric, 'Cloud Confines.' 'The Thrush in February' is a poem of forty octosyllabic quatrains, and is worthy of the haunting fascination of its title. In 'The Appeasement of Demeter' a novel and suggestive phrase is given to an old theme, with an effect, upon the present writer, as of something definitely decorative, of an actual fresco, or heroic design in tapestry. Not that it lacks the vitality of a living thing; it might well be called the 'Joy of Life.' A remarkable poem follows it. Entitled 'Earth and a Wedded Woman,' it deals with the vague physical experience of a child of nature, as she lies on her bed and thinks dreamily of her long-absent lover while she listens to the pouring of the incessant rain. But the finest poem in the volume is the superb 'Hymn to Colour,' which, with 'Love in the Valley,' I should rank foremost among the sensuous poems of George Meredith. There is not a line that is not exquisite in beauty.

Save for a notice in the *Saturday Review*, 'Poems: The Empty Purse, with Odes to the Comic Spirit, to Youth in Memory, and Verses,' appeared in the winter of 1892 without awakening any interest, and 'Jump-to-Glory Jane,' included in this volume, also appeared separately in 1892, lavishly illustrated by Lawrence Housman, and 'edited and arranged' (whatever that may imply) by the late Harry Quilter, who had first given the poem to the world in the pages of his *Universal Review*, October, 1889. The *Times*, October 20, 1892, seems to have been the only journal that paid the least attention to this remarkable poem and the no less remarkable manner of its publication. But when the poem appeared in the *Universal* it would seem to have occasioned some considerable discussion, to which the editor refers in his interesting 'Word on the Birth, History, Illustrations and First Reception of "Jane."' Although this note is bibliographical rather than critical, its intrinsic interest, and the two letters of Meredith's to Quilter, fully justify its quotation here. It is as follows:

When this poem first appeared, in the *Universal Review*, it shared the fate which has attended many of Mr. Meredith's novels; the critics were puzzled, the public doubtful. Demands for explanation flowed in upon me by every post; clergymen remonstrated: not very clear as to their grievance these last, but 'doubtful of the tendency,' a happy phrase which has in its time covered as many sins as charity. The very artist I wished to illustrate the poem not only began, but continued, to make excuse, and finally confessed

that he could not do justice to the verses, and would rather not undertake them. Somehow this got abroad, and certain journals made themselves merry over the artist's incapability to understand the text submitted to him. Then the journalistic word went forth that this poem was 'a satire on the Salvation Army,' and as such it was gravely characterised in several papers. 'Forced, feeble and vulgar,' was this 'tedious doggerel' according to one authority; 'silly and incomprehensible' growled a second; 'scarcely likely to add to the author's reputation' sighed a third, and so on throughout the list. If a kind word was spoken of 'Jane' here and there, it was not written; my very publisher asked me privately what it meant, and friends and relations looked grave; discreetly avoided the subject, as one which was undoubtedly painful.

And yet they were wrong—and will have to 'own up.' Friends and relations, critics and all, must one day confess that this is a good piece of work, and a not incomprehensible one. It is, however, no 'satire on the Salvation Army,' and has no connection with that estimable but unpleasant organisation; and if it be a satire at all, which must be left to the perception of the reader, the poem is also, as Meredith calls it, 'one of the pictures of our England.'

Quilter deems it a 'sly *reductio ad absurdum* to the doctrine which Kingsley set such store by: the connection between physical health and religious feeling.' Meredith himself, writing from Box Hill, August 15, 1889, with regard to illustrating the poem, says:

Whoever does it should be warned against giving burlesque outlines. It is a grave narration of events in English country (? life). Jane, though a jumping, is a thoughtful, woman. She has discovered that the circulation of the blood is best brought about by a continual exercise, and conduces to happy sensations, which are to her as the being of angels in her frame. She has wistful eyes in a touching, but bony face.

In a second letter, dated September 10, 1889, the poet declares Mary Ann Girling, the originator of the 'Shakers,' as a prototype of his 'Jane,' and there it may be said that to be true to life is to be satirical. He writes:

Yes, they are a satire, but one of the pictures of our England as well. Remember Mrs. Girling and her following, and the sensations of Jane, with her blood at the spin with activity, warranted her feeling of exaltation. An English middle-class Blavitzky maniac would also be instructive, though less pathetic than poor Jane.

Mr. G. M. Trevelyan considers 'The Empty Purse' one of the poems which had better been cast in prose.

Perhaps the finest criticism of the 'Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History,' which were reprinted from *Cosmopolis* and published in separate form in 1898, is Mr. Owen Seaman's delightful parody, 'At the Sign of the Cock,' quoted in another chapter of the present work. But there is a passage in an excellent review by 'A. M.' in the *Bookman*, December, 1898, which I take to be from the pen of Miss Alice Macdonell, that accurately touches the later affectation of the pretentious Meredithians, and does justice to the merits without turning a blind eye on the poetic demerits of these 'Odes.' This critic observes:

It is, indeed, a strange irony of fate that the lucid genius of France should be sung in such desperately tortured and turgid strain. True, one hears very little of the difficulty of the poems from the critics, but that is because Mr. Meredith and all his ways are now accepted. Every cultured person is expected to understand him as a matter of course. But I will make bold to say it is a very hard student of the 'Odes' who has come to an approximate comprehension of certain passages, and I am not convinced that the difficulty arises from anything worthier than the common source of such difficulties—a defective expression and a carelessness of beauty. The new affectation of understanding all is hardly less absurd than the old one of failing to understand anything. So we must in honesty speak not of the whole, but of parts.

There is one ode to which this criticism does not apply—that to France in 1870. It has been already published. Perhaps some will recall it for its memorable line—

By their great memories the gods are known.

It is a fine poem finely fashioned. No son of her womb has sung a higher song to her, nor one to make her wince more wholesomely in certain moments.

In the fine study, 'Mr. Meredith's Poetry,' in the *Times*, February 13, 1908, I find this reference to his political odes:

His magnificent political odes have recalled the great days of Shelley's 'Liberty,' Wordsworth's 'Sonnets,' and Coleridge's 'France.' They unite the youth's ardour and intense hold on the present with the seer's vision brooding over time and eternity. There has been nothing like them in the last hundred years. Tennyson was indeed the ideal voice of English political wisdom, but these issues did not greatly move him; and Mr. Kipling has kept in the main to an altogether lower level. But these glorious French odes seem to bear us up away from the dusky lights of earth, which are all the politician has to guide himself by, into the

very splendour of the heavens. They quiver with sympathy, they burn with righteousness, they even have at times the stately motion of their own poet's 'army of unalterable law.' No poet has ever come more triumphantly out of the difficult field of contemporary politics. And there is another thing—the history the poets have given us has generally been more poetical than historical. That has not been the case with Mr. Meredith. There is no sketch of Napoleon in existence that contains so much of the essential truth about him as Mr. Meredith's ode. Everything that Napoleon was to France, and France to him, of curse and blessing, is there, nothing extenuated and nothing set down in malice, however sternly one-sided the balance ultimately falls. The only criticism to make on it is that it is perhaps a little too tumultuous; we are everywhere in the whirlwind and the storm; there is too little of the delightful ease of great poetry; but then it may be that that mighty ghost is not to be raised without the whirlwind's help.

Meredith's last book of verse, and his last work of all, 'A Reading of Earth,' published in the summer of 1901, had far less notice at the hands of the critics, and was not so warmly received in any quarter, as his first book, 'Poems,' published exactly half-a-century before it, yet Mr. Trevelyan makes more references to it in illustration of Meredith's philosophy than to almost any other of his works. It is essentially a book of philosophic poetry, and if at times the philosopher elbows out the poet altogether, it still contains in such fine poems as 'The Night Walk,' 'The Test of Manhood,' and many others, a firm and vigorous declaration of the poet's unswerving faith in the high destiny of Earth's children; the note sounds clear and true after fifty years of enunciation and three and seventy years of life.

Before quitting the subject of Meredith's poetry, there remain a few characteristics to be noted that have been passed untouched both in the general view with which this chapter opened and in the particular references to his various books. On the appearance of 'Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life,' for instance, the *Spectator*, October 15, 1887, printed a very able article on 'An Inarticulate Poet,' that dealt very justly with an aspect of Meredith's poetry which, once thoroughly appreciated, enables the reader, without surrendering any degree of his admiration for the poet, to understand him even in his so-called obscurities and to realise his greatness when he fails; to understand, in a word, that his partial failures have very often to be regarded as partial successes. I do not purpose following the *Spectator* writer in the detail of his





*The Beggar reclining before his Tent.*

#### THE BEGGAR'S SONG.

Now, this, to my notion, is pleasant chest,  
To lie all alone on a red-dust bed;  
Where your nose is not smother'd by bones or bed;  
But a peat fire smells like a garden beneath.

The cottagers bustle about the door,  
And the girl at the window is shouting;  
She's a dish for a man who's a mind to be poor,  
For'd' women are such expensive things.

—*from Mevagh.*

criticism, with which few would be inclined to cavil, but his general observations on the subject of articulateness in poetry are certainly worthy of consideration. He writes :

'The Song is to the singer, and comes back most to him,' says somewhere Walt Whitman; and who can doubt that this in reality is the characteristic of the true poet? His creations are, and must be, more to him than to the rest of the world, for they are the outcome of his own emotions and of his own sensations, though not necessarily of his own experience. But whoever yet could clothe in words the whole of what he felt,—did not leave perhaps the most essential and compelling sense within him unexpressed? But if this is the necessary characteristic of the poet, it is also his chief danger. Not seldom the song is so much to the singer, that he is indifferent what it may be to the world. His instinct very likely tells him truly that his poem is good, for it has sprung straight from some deep well of emotion. He knows, too, that the work in which he has laboured to enshrine it, is wrought with the fine gold of imagination and rhetoric. He forgets that to the world at large it expresses nothing. The emotion of which it was the outcome was either essentially inarticulate or only articulate on one side, and that side he has omitted to show. The judgment of the really great and successful singer is, then, as important as his power to feel and to sing. He must select as well as refine, and must for ever be stepping outside his own work and judging it as from the stranger's standpoint. Only by the use of this judgment which can choose between the expressible and unexpressible, can the poet be articulate, be the singer of songs that the world can understand. Without the power to be articulate no poet can win the highest praise.

But though this is so, it would be far too much to deny altogether the name of poet to a writer because of the frequent absence of articulateness in his verse. Indeed, were we to do so in the present generation, we should banish from the ranks of the poets more than one writer whose name is, in every sense, essentially poetic. It is of the verse of such a partially inarticulate poet that we desire to speak here. As a novelist Mr. George Meredith has won, and deservedly won, a very high reputation among, if not the largest, at least the most thoughtful class of readers. As a poet, however, he has received no adequate recognition. This may, we believe, be accounted for by the fact stated above—the greater part of his verse is inarticulate. It is in no sense meaningless; it is simply unable to say what it desires to say. Take as an example the last stanza from 'Bellerophon':

Lo, this is he in whom the surgent springs  
Of recollections richer than our skies  
To feed the flow of tuneful strings,  
Show but a pool of scum for shooting flies.



How few are those who could read this and not be repelled! Yet what pleasure do they miss who are repelled, who never learn to know the other side of Mr. George Meredith's writings, and to love the noble chords of music he sometimes strikes! It is, then, our intention here not to dwell upon what is harsh, crude, unintelligible and pedantic in Mr. Meredith's verse, but to show instead what a pure and lucid strain of lyric sweetness, what floods of passionate eloquence, are to be found side by side with his crudest and most repellent verse.

I do not follow the *Spectator's* critic further, for the simple reason that he says nothing else which has not already been said and is perfectly familiar to every reader.

It is, I hope I may say, a merit of the present work that no timidity has been shown in admitting every sincere opinion of its subject; 'both sides of the question' have ever been kept in view, with the result that no adverse criticism of the poetry or the prose of Meredith can disturb the equanimity of his convinced and fortified admirers, just as no extravagant laudation of his art can make them forget that he has his great faults as well as his great qualities.

Mr. Arthur Symonds is one of the soundest critics of Meredith's poetry, a warm admirer, but a candid friend. For a general view of the poetry up to the year 1887, no better exposition could be wished than Mr. Symonds's article in the *Westminster Review*, for September of that year. Mr. Symonds, like many another, is puzzled by the joy of the poet's earth-worship and the sombreness of his poetry of human life. 'These two elements, Nature as a source of joy and healing, Life a tragic tangle, form between them the substance or the basis of Mr. Meredith's poetry,' he observes. But to explain this he does not attempt. We may find some sidelight from other minds that will help us to understand this when we come to examine the criticism of Meredith's philosophy. Here, of course, our main business has been with that aspect of his poetry which concerns the art of verse and neither philosophy nor psychology, except in a merely incidental way. The conclusion to which Mr. Symonds's study of the poetry brings him is admirably expressed in the following passage, with which his charmingly written and closely reasoned article ends; it might stand for the last word on Meredith the poet:

Uncertain we cannot but hold Mr. Meredith's art to be; and it is this, and this alone, that can at all render doubtful his claim to a very high place among contemporary poets. He has imagina-

tion, passion, real and rare harmony, varied gifts—gifts utterly wanting to several poets we might name, whose possession of just the one gift in which he is lacking has allowed them to far outstrip him in the popular estimation, and may do much to foist them permanently into a place above him. . . . Over too much of his harvest-field an enemy, an enemy within, has sowed tares. As in the parable, wheat and tares grow together; there is no plucking out the weeds without carrying the good corn with them; and we must leave it to Time the careful reaper, the reaper who never errs though he is long in reaping, to gather together first the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them; but to gather the wheat into his barn.

Mr. Laurie Magnus in his noteworthy article on 'The Succession of Mr. Meredith,' contributed to the *Fortnightly*, December, 1907, has some apt observations on the technique of the poetry, which may help the student to a nicer appreciation of Meredith's efforts to extract from the English language a greater service in suggestiveness than any other poet has attempted. Mr. Magnus writes:

He has been regarded too long as a poet apart from the poetic line, and something of this neglect has been due to the common confusion between thought and style. The progress of poetry is not marked by steps in the excellence of *technique*. Its true progress lies in its successive and successful powers of assimilating, interpreting, and representing to the age in which the poet lives the new experience of life which is gathered in his age, and which is added to the accumulating evidence of God to man. His instrument—a feeble one—is language, and, as the experience is more novel and the evidence more unexpected, so his instrument proves less serviceable and malleable. There are even occasions when the commonest currency of speech has to be called in to be re-coined, in order to remove its trite appearance, and to repair its expressiveness. The imperfection of language as a medium of truth is remedied in course of years. It repeats, in similar circumstances, differing only in degree, the history of its original development. All this is familiar enough, but, till recently, it has not been applied to the criticism of Mr. Meredith's poetry; and, thus applied, it explains his makeshift with an adjective where no substantive exists—'wing our green to wed our blue' is a typical example out of many; it explains his use of 'Earth,' and, partially, his disuse of 'God'; and it explains the cause, if not altogether the result, of the obscurity of such poems as his 'Hymn to Colour.' There he is adapting an old language to the requirements of a late philosophy; and, while we are certain that the instrument will ultimately be sharpened to its new use, we are grateful for the rough-hewn thoughts, which it has been forced meanwhile to shape by the

invincible purpose of the poet's forward imagination. And often the purpose conquers; the instrument and the design are at one. Sometimes in a lonely line, sometimes, here and there, in a stanza, at other times in whole poems, the expression is equal to the thought, and truth flashes in our eyes. Take, for instance, the last magnificent revelation of 'Meditation under Stars' :

A wonder edges the familiar face :  
 She wears no more that robe of printed hours :  
 Half strange seems Earth, and sweeter than her flowers.

As to the veiled verdict of Time on the poetry of George Meredith, I find myself reverting to the most suggestive *Times* article, to which attention has been given above; for there the writer strikes the truth concerning the relative values of prose and poetry in their endurance of the test of Time :

Every one knows his novels, but only the few who go to seek literature wherever they can find it have much acquaintance with his poetry. Yet poetry has, on the whole, proved so much the most lasting of the forms of creative human speech that it may well be that 'Love in the Valley' may be remembered at least as long as 'The Egoist.' 'Rasselas' had in its day many more readers than 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'; and Sidney was long thought of as the author of the 'Arcadia,' and not as the writer of the Sonnets to Stella; but in each case, for us to-day, the verse has a stronger life than the prose. The fact, perhaps, is more that the pleasurable excitement afforded by metre, and the higher mood in which poetry is usually written, carry us into an atmosphere in which we are less conscious of changed fashions in thought and expression than we inevitably are in prose. There is in poetry an element of strangeness which makes us ready to welcome a certain unlikeness to our ways of speech and our own point of view. But that is not so in prose. The fancies which are delightful in Elizabethan verse are only tolerable in the contemporary prose; the conceits which we endure in Donne or Cowley would not be endured in any writer who was not a poet. Perhaps the truth is that, with contemporaries, prose has a better chance than verse, other things being equal; with posterity, other things being equal, verse has a better chance than prose.

It may be idle to prophesy, but, with all its faults, there are in Meredith's poetry certain elements of vitality which will enable it to endure, and perhaps to find an infinitely wider range of life in the minds of men, when much of his prose will have been forgotten. He may be, in a certain sense, 'an inarticulate poet,' but only for the reason Mr. Laurie Magnus has explained in his apt

allusion to 'the invincible purpose of the poet's forward imagination.' For this reason, apart from others, is he likely to prove articulate to following generations in an immensely greater degree than to his own, and chiefly through the medium of his poetry. We may let the last words on Meredith the poet be these favourite lines of his own :

Full lasting is the song though he  
The singer passes ; lasting, too,  
For souls not lent in usury,  
The rapture of the forward view.

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## XII

### THE COMIC SPIRIT

THE Spirit of Comedy broods over Meredith in all his writings. He is ever conscious of her presence 'overhead.' The marvel is that, so inspired, he never attempted writing for the stage, which, as he assures us, 'would be a corrective of a too-encrusted scholarly style, into which some great ones fall at times.' Often in the course of his narrative we seem to detect a yearning after stage effect; the mind of the novelist is asking him how this or that scene he is depicting would 'go' in an acted comedy. He is fond, too, of theatrical similes; 'The Egoist' he calls 'a comedy in narrative,' and the stormy love-story of Lassalle and Fraulein von Doenniges he turns into fiction as 'The Tragic Comedians,' while his stories abound in passages cast in terms of the stage instead of those of ordinary prose narrative. It might be wrong, however, if we concluded from this that the real tragedy of Meredith's literary career was an unrealised ambition to transfer his personages to the stage. Dickens's passion for the theatre was something quite different. Most human beings go through a period of life during which they are fascinated by the glamour of the theatre; some never outlive it; and Dickens was in the latter category. But we have no reason for supposing that Meredith was ever in the first condition. He shows no inkling of love for the theatre in the sense of the 'stage-struck' Dickens. It is again an affair of the intellect; the Greek theatre, with its chorus and 'gods,' unlike those of the hearty gallery, are more to his mind. His notion of the stage is thus seldom, if ever, the concrete institution of our time, but rather an academic abstraction in some sort; a mirrored memory of the Athenian. If this be so, it is not surprising that he never seriously attempted writing for the stage; certainly his method is the anti-thesis of the purely dramatic, and we cannot imagine that success would have awaited him as a playwright. Yet he is an essential dramaturge in his attitude to his personages; he watches over them and directs them; he plays chorus to them with more gusto than he

does anything else; but he does not steadily advance his drama in the spoken words of his characters; they may be quick with life, but it is not always, nor often, dramatic life. Withal, Molière is his greatest master, and if Meredith has never given a comedy to the stage, Comedy has given Meredith to literature. Nor is this to be regretted.

Mr. Humphrey Ward has a very just note on this in his 'Reign of Queen Victoria,' when he remarks:

Nature designed George Meredith for a great writer of serious comedy, a compeer of Congreve. The incompatibility of literary merit with dramatic success in our day drove him to the novel, which he peopled with the characters of the stage. He paints and dresses for artificial light; hence the apparent want of nature, which disappears on a fair consideration of his aim. No modern novelist demands so much intellect from his readers or gives them so much of his own. What pith and sparkle are to him, an extraordinary delicacy of observation is to Thomas Hardy, who has made more of a few square miles of Dorsetshire than many other novelists have been able to make of the great metropolis.

How vital has been the influence of the comic spirit on the novelist we may judge, not merely by its abundant evidence in his works, or by his splendid ode 'To the Comic Spirit,' but by his only essay of importance being that 'On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit,' delivered at the London Institution, February 1, 1877. A few brief passages from the revised edition of the lecture, as published in book-form in 1897, will put us in possession of Meredith's main ideas of Comedy before we proceed to consider them in the light of criticism. Let us first note these distinctions and their personal applications:

You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes.

If you detect the ridicule, and your kindness is chilled by it, you are slipping into the grasp of Satire.

If instead of falling foul of the ridiculous person with a satiric rod, to make him writhe and shriek aloud, you prefer to sting him under a semi-caress, by which he shall in his anguish be rendered dubious whether indeed anything has hurt him, you are an engine of Irony.

If you laugh all round him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and yours

to your neighbour, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is a spirit of Humour that is moving you.

The Comic, which is the perceptive, is the governing spirit, awakening and giving aim to these powers of laughter, but it is not to be confounded with them: it enfolds a thinner form of them, differing from satire, in not sharply driving into the quivering sensibilities, and from humour in not comforting them and tucking them up, or indicating a broader than the range of this bustling world to them.

In the following Meredith states his main contention as to the uses of the comic spirit:

Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

With these passages before us it is interesting to turn to the *Spectator's* comment on this lecture, in its issue of February 10, 1877. The writer declares that 'the aroma of the lecture almost entirely exhales,' and he seems unable to recapture it. The article is admirably written and closely reasoned. Though based evidently on an incomplete report of the lecture, the writer loses nothing essential of Meredith's meaning, which may be a point in favour of a condensed report, for the elaborated lecture, as it now stands, is none too easy to follow, and the first reading leaves one somewhat fogged. Thus the *Spectator*:

As we understand Mr. Meredith, he intended to insist that the capacity for 'thoughtful laughter,' as distinguished from broad laughter, and still more from vacuous laughter, is one of the most unerring as well as subtle tests of civilisation, and if our reading is true, we can most cordially agree with him. To be capable of thoughtful laughter, of enjoying, say, a comedy in which the follies of the day are ridiculed without bitterness and without gross

exaggeration, and laughter is sought in provoking the sudden sense of surprise that a situation so familiar should be so ridiculous, a man must have most of the qualities which, when developed in a large aggregation of men, produce civilisation. He must be able to appreciate a kind of humour, in which the element of latent cruelty that goes to make broad humour, the humour of Western farce, is absent, as well as the grossness which performs the same function in the East; must be of perception quick enough to catch instantly the meaning of a situation; must have the habit of reflection, and must be, above all things, habitually tolerant, so tolerant that the laugh which strikes himself gives him a hint instead of creating irritation. A whole nation composed of such men would undoubtedly be in most respects in the mental condition to which civilisation is acceptable, and which, therefore, sooner or later produces it. We could not imagine an uncivilised nation cordially appreciating, say, merely to take an illustration of the hour, Mr. Robertson's 'Caste'; nor could we believe that a class capable of revelling in Miss Austen's novels, the whole merit of which is the sustained production of thoughtful laughter, was uncivilised. They were not bores, whatever their vices, who smiled over Molière. . . . A nation may be full of capacity for enjoying thoughtful laughter, and yet may from circumstances neither produce nor enjoy comedies of the highest kind. Mr. Meredith himself has mentioned the possibility of the capacity being restrained by mistaken religious feeling, but a people may be so situated that this special source of this special enjoyment is not encouraged sufficiently by the classes that support the theatre, and playwrights may be compelled to attract audiences by evoking a broader or more vacuous laughter. That must be the case more or less in every nation which is not, like the Athenian people, an aristocracy resting upon slave-labour, and in which there are violently differing grades of cultivation; and that is, we suspect, for other reasons, the case in England now. We are not about to discuss the causes of the situation, but as a fact, high comedy, comedy up to Mr. Meredith's ideal, does not 'draw.' Some exercise of the intellect is necessary to thoughtful laughter, and the classes who throng the theatres visit them in the main in the hope of being amused without intellectual exertion—wish for stimulus of a rougher kind, be it good or bad, strong situation or break-down dancing, and find their provocation to thoughtful laughter elsewhere than on the stage. It may be questioned if the theatres could be maintained by comedies of the kind which Mr. Meredith admires, and quite unquestionable that they are not produced in any numbers; that the Victorian Age, whatever its other merits—and they are great—will never be quoted as the age of an English Menander. It might be harsh to say that no play of our day will live except as a poem, but it may be taken as certain that no comedy will.



In spite of the fact that the theatre has outlived the Puritanical ban and that the nation is willing to be entertained by it, no one expects to see produced on the stage of our day, as described by Meredith, the ideal comedy, which will hold its place on the stage for centuries to come. But that is no proof, says the *Spectator*, that English civilisation has failed. The critique of the lecture concludes in these words :

The nation which in one generation has produced, recognised, and enjoyed Sydney Smith, Thackeray and George Eliot has no reason to defend its capacity either for producing or for enjoying thoughtful laughter. The love of the gently humorous and even of the subtly humorous has become a distinct characteristic, reaching farther down in society than many who habitually depreciate Englishmen are perhaps aware. Mr. Meredith must widen his test-question, to make it applicable to English society; but when it is widened it is, we admit, one of the most searching of all. The laughter that springs of thought is the prerogative, as it is perhaps the highest intellectual enjoyment, of the civilised alone.

When 'The Idea of Comedy' was published in 1897, after being for twenty years accessible only in the files of the *New Quarterly Magazine*, among the critics who were attracted by it were Mr. G. B. Shaw and Mr. William Archer, to both of whom, as profound students of the stage, there was here much for reflection. Mr. Bernard Shaw, in his article in the *Saturday Review*, March 27, 1897, described Meredith as 'perhaps the highest living English authority on its subject.' He considered that Meredith knew more about plays than playgoers, and demurred to the statement that 'the English public have the basis of the comic in them: an esteem for common sense,' even when qualified with 'taking them generally.' To this Mr. Shaw rejoined :

If it were to be my last word on earth I must tell Mr. Meredith to his face that whether you take them generally or particularly—whether in the lump, or sectionally as playgoers, churchgoers, voters, and what not—they are everywhere united and made strong by the bond of their common nonsense, their invincible determination, to tell and be told lies about everything, and their power of dealing acquisitively and successfully with facts whilst keeping them, like disaffected slaves, rigidly in their proper place: that is, outside the moral consciousness. The Englishman is the most successful man in the world simply because he values success—meaning money and social precedence—more than anything else, especially more than fine art, his attitude towards which, culture-affectation apart, is one of half-diffident, half-contemptuous curiosity, and of course

more than clear-headedness, spiritual insight, truth, justice and so forth. It is precisely this unscrupulousness and singleness of purpose that constitutes the Englishman's pre-eminent 'common sense'; and this sort of common sense, I submit to Mr. Meredith, is not only not 'the basis of the comic,' but actually makes comedy impossible, because it would not seem like common sense at all if it were not self-satisfiedly unconscious of its moral and intellectual bluntness, whereas the function of comedy is to dispel such unconsciousness by turning the search-light of the keenest moral and intellectual analysis right on to it. . . . Thus he (the Englishman) is a moralist, an ascetic, a Christian, a truth-teller, and a plain dealer by profession and by conviction; and it is wholly against this conviction that, judged by his own canons, he finds himself in practice a great rogue, a liar, an unconscionable pirate, a grinder of the face of the poor and a libertine. Mr. Meredith points out daintily that the cure for this self-treasonable confusion and darkness is Comedy, whose spirit overhead will 'look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.' Yes, Mr. Meredith; but suppose the patients have 'common sense' enough not to want to be cured! Suppose they realise the immense commercial advantage of keeping their ideal life and their practical business life in two separate conscience-tight compartments, which nothing but 'the Comic Spirit' can knock into one! Suppose, therefore, they dread the Comic Spirit more than anything else in the world, shrinking from its 'illumination' and considering its 'silvery laughter' in execrable taste! Surely in doing so they are only carrying out the common-sense view, in which an encouragement and enjoyment of comedy must appear as silly and suicidal and 'un-English' as the conduct of the man who sets fire to his own house for the sake of seeing the flying sparks, the red glow in the sky, the fantastic shadows on the walls, the excitement of the crowd, the gleaming charge of the engines, and the dismay of the neighbours.

All this is very characteristic of Mr. Bernard Shaw, and there is his usual seriousness threading his lively wit. If Meredith has never spared the Englishman, what shall we say of Mr. Shaw? Meredith's severest trouncings of John Bull have been but gentle corrections compared with the whirling onslaughts of 'G. B. S.' Mr. Shaw even soundly asserts that the English playgoing public 'positively dislikes comedy'; but we must remember this was before his own comedies found fit audience in London as well as in New York and Berlin. Yet he makes a point when he says:

No: if this were an age for comedies Mr. Meredith would have been asked for one before this. How would a comedy from him be relished, I wonder, by the people who wanted to have the

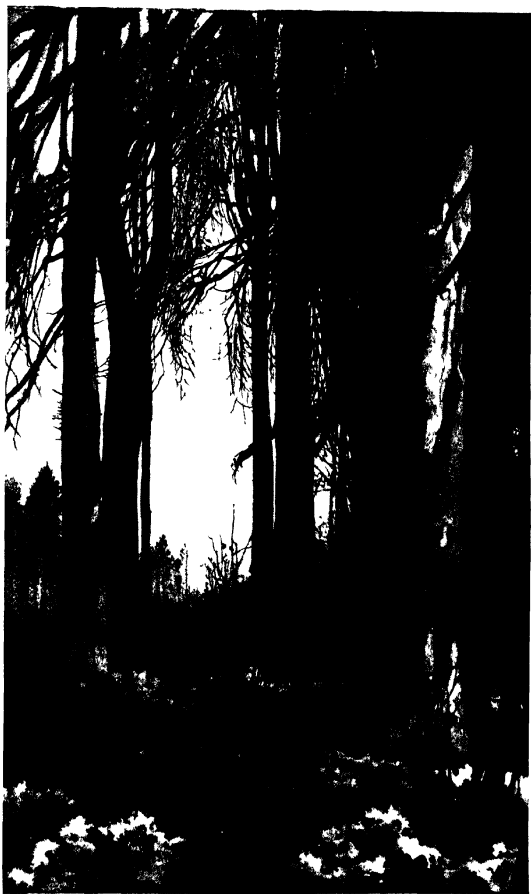
revisers of the Authorised Version of the Bible prosecuted for blasphemy because they corrected as many of its mistranslations as they dared, and who reviled Froude for not suppressing Carlyle's diary and writing a fictitious biography of him, instead of letting out the truth? Comedy, indeed! I drop the subject with a hollow laugh.

Mr. William Archer, in the *Westminster Gazette*, March 16, 1897, described the 'Essay on Comedy' as 'one of the subtlest, wittiest and most luminous pieces of criticism in the English language,' and declared that had he known it from its first magazine appearance it 'would have been a thing of light and leading' to him. He gives an excellent summary of its leading points rather than a running criticism of the same, and the most interesting paragraph of his article is that reprinted below:

One could wish that Mr. Meredith had said more of the relation between the comedy of types and the comedy of individual character. He has himself drawn the great type-figure of modern fiction—I mean, of course, 'the Egoist'—fusing, in that masterpiece, the two methods of art, and making of a colossal type a complete individual. Has it ever occurred to Mr. Meredith that the decline, not to say the impossibility, of pure comedy on the modern stage is due to the fact that the broad types are exhausted, and that individuals, if they live at all, touch our sympathies so nearly as to interfere with the free play of the Comic Spirit? It may be too much to say that the types are exhausted; but in any case the centring of all attention upon one vice or foible strikes us, in modern drama, as an expedient of farce. I am inclined, however, to foresee a revival of pure comedy (as distinct from farce on the one hand and the drama on the other) so soon as we shall have got over that itch for action and intrigue with which Scribe inoculated us. We are gradually expelling it from our blood; but it takes time. Fancy 'Le Misanthrope' or 'Les Femmes Savantes' produced for the first time before an audience of to-day! How the critics would cluster together in the *entr'actes* and buttonhole each other to explain that 'there's no action,' that 'nothing happens,' that 'we don't get any forr'ader,' that 'it's all talkee-talkee,' and so on through the whole litany! Which of us, I wonder, would pluck up heart to cry, like the legendary man in the pit, '*Courage, Molière! Voilà la bonne comédie!*'

Taking Meredith's own ideals of comedy and applying them to him as a novelist, 'F. Y. E.,' writing in the *Speaker*, October 31, 1903, on 'The Laughter of the Mind,' is led to this conclusion:

If we English have no such school of comedy, we have a literature



*By arrangement with the 'Poll Moll  
Magazine']*

*[From a drawing by William  
Hude.]*

THE WOODS OF WESTERMAIN NEAR WOOTON, SURREY.

*[To face p. 296]*



steeped in the comic idea. We have Fielding, Goldsmith, Jane Austen—and another novelist's name must be added to these, their superior in the hierarchy of the imagination, their equal, at least, in the large sanity of his vision. The comic spirit is the spirit which has most constantly governed the attitude of Mr. Meredith towards his creatures. His appeal has been neither to the puritan nor to the hypergelasts, 'the excessive laughers, ever laughing, who are as clappers of a bell that may be rung by a breeze, a grimace, who are so loosely put together that a wink will shake them'; least of all to the sentimentalists who approve of satire because 'it smells of carrion, which they are not,' but dread comedy which 'cannot be used by any exalted variety as a scourge and a broom.' That in his vast and impressive work he transcends the comic goes without saying; but one great novel of his is entirely a comedy, and in that little masterpiece, 'The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper,' if the lady's treatment of the General is of the nature of irony, the author's treatment of both is purely comic. No Englishman writing fiction has aimed so directly at the head of his readers; none, seeing how thin is the drapery veiling our human passions, teaches us so clearly to respect it in the hope of something better; none, while showing men and women by unhappy chances justly or excusably rebellious against our state of society, has implicitly professed a more rooted belief that our state of society is founded in common sense, or so often provided the best correction of the bitterness that comes of dwelling upon contrasts, by arousing the Laughter of the Mind.

Mr. W. L. Courtney very happily chose for the title of his *Daily Telegraph* article on the eightieth birthday 'George Meredith and the Spirit of Comedy,' though only a few passages in the article justify its title. One of these passages, however, helps forward our present consideration of the subject. Mr. Courtney writes:

The finest flower of the Comic Spirit is to be found in Meredith's great novel 'The Egoist.' The earlier romances were more boyish, more boisterous. 'Evan Harrington,' for instance, is a kind of romantic farce, especially in the character of the Great Melchisedek, in which the author is supposed to have availed himself of some of his father's eccentricities, much as Dickens permitted his father to stand for part of the portrait of Mr. Micawber. 'Harry Richmond' was almost as youthfully hilarious. But when we get to the later work—for 'The Egoist' only appeared in 1879—we find a subtlety of analysis, an accuracy of perception, a morbid criticism, which the earlier work did not admit of. In many ways the portrait of Sir Willoughby Patterne in his relations with Clara Middleton is one of the most merciless pieces of dissection which was ever attempted. It is not altogether unkindly in tone, but it

is perfectly deadly in effect. We see before us exposed in a capital instance that which Meredith was inclined to think the great fault of the time, the narrow self-absorption, the splendid selfishness, the genial belief that the world existed in and for the sole personality of the self-conscious hero. Here the comic spirit is at work with a vengeance. Take, for instance—and it is a most suggestive contrast—the love-making in 'Richard Feverel' and the love-making in 'The Egoist.' Our octogenarian novelist is a romantic in the true sense of the term, in that he has the most sovereign faith in love. But he knows the difference between the youthful, ingenuous ardour of two human beings upon whom the divine madness has descended for the first time, and the paler, more ineffectual, more calculated philandering of the middle-aged.

Mr. Courtney then goes on to quote the well-known love-scene from 'Feverel,' and sets side by side with it Sir Willoughby's insisting upon Clara to swear she will love him 'beyond death,' leaving us, perhaps, to infer that the one is informed by the spirit of romance and the other by that of comedy, though further than observing that 'the egoism of Sir Willoughby stands bare' he offers no comment. But surely the whole scheme of 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' is as deeply rooted in comedy as that of 'The Egoist,' and even the love passages are in perfect tune with the comic spirit, though apart from the whole they might pass for romantic. We do not look for romance or the romantic under such a title as 'A Diversion played on a penny whistle,' nor do we get it, if we regard this scene as of a piece with the whole tragic-comedy, which we are surely justified in doing.

On the whole the criticism of Meredith and the Comic Spirit is the least satisfactory reach of the veritable Mississippi of Meredith criticism. It is apt to run to shallows, as we shall see presently. Instead of viewing him squarely as, first and last, a writer depicting life by means of types born of the comic spirit or, where otherwise conceived, still made to play their parts in comedy, his critics have been apt to content themselves by naming some subsidiary endowment of the comic as one of his attributes: now it is wit, now humour, and again it is satire or irony. Each of these qualities is distinct from the other, and seldom are any two of them found together, yet we find them all loosely attributed to the same man and touched upon without the slightest understanding by many otherwise excellent critics. If Meredith's own definitions already quoted in this chapter be kept in mind, we shall run no risk of confusing wit with humour, or irony with satire; and testing some

of the criticism by the aforesaid definitions, which are, beyond all cavil, just, we shall be able to correct much that has been written about him and is so near the truth that only the loose application of words keeps it from touching the mark. Broadly, Meredith is neither a wit nor a humorist, an ironist nor a satirist; but he is a great comic writer and as such 'he enfolds a thinner form' of all these others, making use of them all, but humour least of all, setting them in perspective, governing and directing them under the Comic. Mr. W. C. Brownell, I fancy, sees this clearly enough, though he sees it entirely to Meredith's disadvantage, since in his 'Victorian Prose Masters' it leads him to this conclusion:

His devotion to the tricksy spirit of Comedy led him early to emulate her elusiveness; the interest in the game grew upon him, and his latest books are marked by the very mania of indirection and inuendo. It is not obscurity of style that makes it difficult to follow the will-o'-the-wisp of his genius disporting itself over, it must be confessed, the marshiest of territory often, but the actual *chevaux-de-frise* his ingenuity interposes between his reader and his meaning. The obscurity lies in his whole presentation of the subject. He does it out grudgingly, and endeavours to whip your interest by tantalising your perceptions. The elaborate exordium of 'Diana of the Crossways' should be read after reading the book. The prelude of 'The Egoist' can be understood at all only as a postlude. The beginning of 'Beauchamp's Career' is essentially a peroration, and in reading it how long is it before you discover that it is about the Crimean War you are reading? If an incident is imminent he defers it; if it is far in the future he puzzles you with adumbrative hints of it; if it is likely he masks its likelihood by presenting it fancifully; if it is improbable he exhausts ingenuity in rendering it probable. It is impossible not to conceive the notion that he is enjoying himself at your expense, at least that he is the host having a good time at his own party. It is not an occasional but a frequent experience to find the key to, say, three pages of riddle on the fourth page. And this would not be so disconcerting as it is, were it not for the fact that the riddle of the first three is carefully dissembled under that deceitful aspect of something palpably preliminary; so that until you come to the key you are not conscious of the existence of the riddle and only wonder why you don't comprehend. The interest of the dilettante is universal and no doubt includes the pleasure of mystification. The effect produced is, however, not suspense, which has been a reliance of less original novelists, but disquiet. His motive is to keep you guessing. He only explains when you have given it up. In the end even the reader who enjoys guessing must lose interest. For other readers the dullness of long stretches of his books must be



appalling. A great part of the art of fiction consists in making the filling of the grand construction interesting and significant. But this demands temperament, and Mr. Meredith has to depend upon artifice. And his artifice is mainly mystification. It is the coquetry of comedy, not its substance.

This is an extreme criticism, for while it embodies certain strictures which are just and called for, it overstates Mr. Brownell's case—a good one in the main—and needs only one comic figure—one of so many—to be advanced against it to crumble it down; Mr. Brownell says 'it is the coquetry of comedy,' and we have but to take Sir Willoughby and retort, 'Behold the substance!' Henley, in his appreciation of 'The Egoist' quoted in a preceding chapter, has done full justice to Sir Willoughby; but at this point I should like to introduce a passage from M. Le Gallienne's well-known work on the characteristics of Meredith, which provides a good counterblast to Mr. Brownell:

{Mr. Meredith names 'The Egoist' 'a comedy in narrative,' but in doing so he uses the word comedy with a significance rarely respected . . . mere satire, humour, or any species of fun-making are all very distinct from, however related to, that significance. These but result from the working of the comic spirit which in itself is only a detective force; they are, of course, included in this present comedy, but they are far from all. When one comes to consider Sir Willoughby one realises how far. He is Mr. Meredith's great study in that Comic Muse which he invokes in his first chapter, and yet he hardly keeps the table on a roar. At least, laughter is not the only emotion he excites; tears and terror rainbowed by laughter might figure our complicated impression. A tragic figure discovered for us through the eye of comedy. It is certainly comic, in the customary sense, to see that great-mannered sublimity, that ultra-refined sentimentalism reduced to paradox by the exposure of its springs; but the laugh is only at the inconsistency, it can hardly face the fact. And to see Sir Willoughby on his knees vainly imploring that Lætitia, who has all through served but as an 'old-lace' foil for Clara, and with utter difficulty at last winning her, not for her sake either, but for fear of the world, the east wind of the world, and no longer the worshipful Juggernaut Lætitia of old, but Lætitia enlightened and unloving—all this is comic, of course; to see tables turned is always comic, but we must not forget that life is before them, and, as Hazlitt says, 'When the curtain next goes up it will be tragedy'—if the situation on which it falls can be called anything else. Sir Willoughby indeed inspires that greatest laughter which has its springs in the warmth and the richness of tears. If he is Mr. Meredith's greatest comic study,

he is, at the same time, his most pathetic figure. Of course, his pathos is not of the drawing-room ballad order, any more, indeed, than his comedy would 'select' for a 'library of humour'—those fields are fuller, Mr. Meredith rarely strives there, possibly for the same reason that Landor strove not. But those for whom he has any appeal must feel with his creator that 'he who would desire to clothe himself at everybody's expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the living person. Only he is not allowed to run at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation.' The pathos, as everything else in the book, is essential. That is, of course, why 'The Egoist' is so pre-eminently Mr. Meredith's typical book, and Sir Willoughby his typical characterisation; and there could hardly be a more victorious justification of a method.

That is as good as anything that has been written about Meredith and the Comic Spirit, and one cannot help feeling that even so fine a critic and devoted a Meredithian as the late James Thomson ('B. V.') does not quite hit the mark when he writes ('Cope's Smoke-room Booklets,' 1889):

George Meredith is distinctly rather a man's than a woman's writer. He has the broad, jolly humour, full-blooded with beef and beer, of great Fielding, as well as his swift, keen insight; he has the quaint, fantastic, ironical humour of the poet and scholar and thinker—freakish touches of Sterne and Jean Paul and Carlyle and his own father-in-law (Peacock, of 'Nightmare Abbey,' 'Gryll Grange,' 'Headlong Hall,' and other enjoyable sojourning places, who had Shelley for a friend). In brief, he is humoristic and ironical; and women in general care for no humour save of the nursery, distrust and dislike all irony except in talking with and about one another. But men will savour in that dialogue of Tinker and Ploughman the fine open-air wayside relish in which our robust old plays and novels are so rich, in which most of our modern are so poor. George Borrow, George Eliot, George Meredith, can reproduce for us this pithy, vulgar talk, succulent with honest nature and bookless mother wit; but how many else can furnish it unadulterated? I have named our most popular—and justly popular—great novelist along with him who is one of the least popular; and to my mind he is throned not less eminent than she; and if certain jewels in her crown are lacking in his, he has others not less precious that are wanting in hers.

Thomson in the foregoing has failed of the larger view, and the best that Henry Holbeach (William Brighty Rands) could say was that Meredith was 'above all things capable of being a humorist

of the Shandean school.' The fact is that we should have had less difference of opinion as to the Comic Spirit and Meredith if he had been more of a humorist and less a wit. But then he had not been George Meredith. A humorist could never have set out to war on sentimentalists, as he must be something of a sentimentalist himself. Note his own analysis of the humorist, and we shall see how seldom it applies to himself. We do not find him often 'laugh all round him (the ridiculous person), tumble him, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him,' and the rest. The Comic is his inspirer, and, true to his muse, he is rarely to be found 'comforting and tucking up' the objects of his attention, as the humorist, out of his kindly, sympathetic heart, is for ever doing. Mr. J. M. Barrie, surely one of our greatest humorists, writes of Meredith with real insight when he says, in the *Contemporary*, October, 1888 :

It is Mr. Meredith's wit that wearies many of his readers. He is, I think, the greatest wit this country has produced. Sheridan is not visible beside him, and Pope has only the advantage of polish. Mr. Meredith is far more than a wit, but wit is his most obvious faculty, and he seldom keeps it in subordination. Wit does not proceed from the heart, and so in many of Mr. Meredith's books there is little heart. They compare badly in this respect with Thackeray's novels; indeed, his characters are often puppets, as Thackeray's were not, and the famous ending to 'Vanity Fair' would be in its proper place at the end of 'The Egoist.' This want of heart is a part of the price Mr. Meredith pays for his wit, but he also suffers in another way, that damages his books as comedies not less than as novels. He puts his wit into the mouths of nearly every one of his characters. They are all there to sparkle, and in the act to destroy their individuality. They are introduced in lines so wise and pointed that at once they stand out as sharply defined human beings; then they talk as the persons we had conceived could never talk, and so we lose grip of them. It is this that makes so many readers unable to follow the story; they never know when they have the characters.

Of course, even in this Mr. Barrie is dealing only with one aspect of the subject, and that is concerned more with the medium than with the matter. No criticism of Meredith that treats largely or in detail of his literary style is going deep enough. We are still among the shallows when we have said all that can be said about his witty presentment of his themes. We have to take his novels as a whole, ignoring all verbal eccentricities, all that may run counter to established notions of literary art, and ask ourselves what is the driving

force that gave them being. So regarded, the Comic Spirit is seen over and in them all, dictating 'The Shaving of Shagpat' and presiding forty years later over the writing of 'The Amazing Marriage.' The 'sword of common sense' gleams through each one of the splendid series.

Sword of Common Sense!—  
Our surest gift: the sacred chain  
Of man to man: firm earth for trust  
In structures vowed to permanence:—  
Thou guardian issue of the harvest brain.

### XIII

#### HIS PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Deepest and keenest of our time who pace  
The variant by-paths of the uncertain heart,  
In undiscerned mysterious ways apart,  
Thou huntest on the Assyrian monster's trace:  
That sweeping-pinioned Thing-with-human-face—  
    Poor Man—with wings hoof-weighted lest they start  
    To try the breeze above this human mart.  
In heights pre-occupied of a god-like race.

Among the stammering sophists of the age  
    Thy words are absolute, thy vision true;  
No hand but thine is found to fit the gage  
    The Titan, Shakespeare, to a whole world threw.  
Till thou hast boldly to his challenge sprung,  
No rival had he in our English tongue.

W. MORTON FULLERTON, in *The Yellow Book*.

'HE, too, like all the larger spirits of this age of inward trouble and perplexity, whether with or against his will, must needs be a preacher,' says Dr. Dowden in his study of Meredith's poetry. Some would have it that he is a preacher before all else, that his philosophy will outlast his art. But as to what that philosophy is, he has left us in no doubt, it is enunciated with sufficient clearness and consistency in his prose and poetry. In the poems it is, of course, expressed with a concentration, a compression of words, which makes many a ringing phrase memorable, unforgettable, and so leads one to the erroneous conclusion that it is more ingrained in his poetry than in his prose. The observant student knows it is not so. Yet examine the writings of the critics who have sought to express Meredith's philosophy, and you will find the rarest brief mentions of the novels. I have read every article of the kind, every incidental reference, and I declare one might conclude from them that Meredith's novels had scant concern with philosophy. The fact is that, had he never written a line of verse, every feature and detail of his philosophy had been obvious in his prose fiction, but, having given us the essence of his philosophy in his poetry, his expositors naturally and wisely choose that for their exegeses. It is



J J a J nt t H I U M I [ l r ng U U a  
M J k ] H c

IN MIREDDITHS COUNTRY SUNSHI STOPS LOOKING TOWARDS  
ELTHI HILL



not a case of the one medium amplifying or correcting the ethical teaching of the other, but of both setting forth the same reading of life and earth.

A probable consequence of this would lead us to thought of Meredith's ultimate place, a subject reserved for consideration in a later chapter. But here one is tempted to observe that if it is his teaching that singles him out from the writers of his time, and if that teaching is given with more intensity and directness in his poetry, the chances are that his fame as a poet will outgrow and finally obscure his reputation as a novelist. Furthermore, if it is philosophy men will seek for in his poetry, in turn the æsthetic consideration of that may give place to the ethical, and the teaching of the poetry, hardening into a quickly-defined creed, even the poetry, which is not always most pleasing where it is most philosophic, may cease to attract, and the poet become a force in the abstraction of thought rather than a companion singer of the thoughtful reader.

Half-a-dozen lines of his verse might be chosen as a sort of tabloid of his teaching. It is capable of the utmost compression and the utmost expansion. Join 'The Egoist' to 'Richard Feverel,' 'Vittoria,' 'One of Our Conquerors,' and 'Lord Ormont'—a mighty mass of exposition—and it is by no means complete. Take 'Modern Love' and the whole is there; every phase and facet of it there! And in the sixty lines of 'Earth and a Wedded Woman' the whole immutable ethic of nature, as he conceives it, is epitomised. But of this later; we have to note many features of his teaching before we arrive at his 'reading of earth.' His point of view, his mental approach, must first engage us, and this was put in a striking way by Mr. J. A. Newton-Robinson in 'A Study of Mr. George Meredith' in *Murray's Magazine*, December, 1891, where he wrote :

Life to Mr. Meredith is a game, though it is true he watches the moves of the pieces with keen and serious interest. His characters are machines which he expounds to us. He is a psychological showman.

'Ladies and gentlemen, walk this way! Here is an interesting model never before placed under the microscope. Observe the dull blood running through the heart, how slow and pulseless! Note that subtle manifestation of egoism, that burst of emotion! This exhibit, on the contrary, is morally well put together, and shows the action of a noble unselfishness. This interesting creature has gleams of poetry and grace'—and so on, and so on, till the brain grows wearied and confused with hearkening to the whirr of the



wheels of our mental clockwork. This dissection of the human soul is, however, done with marvellous dramatic skill, and an exquisitely handled knife. The exposition is not *doctrinaire* or dogmatic, but rather empirical and living, proceeding by examples rather than by theory, and bears the impress of a mind of high quality and rarest insight, being in fact, after all deductions, the work of true genius.

There is no manner of doubt that intellect counts for more with Meredith than with any other novelist or poet we can name. He looks at everything with the mind, never with the feelings, and even when he touches us emotionally,—as he does magnificently in such an episode as the swimming Aminta, calling ‘Matey’ to Weyburn in the sea, and freeing herself for ever from Lord Ormont by her heart-cry to her first lover,—look close and we shall find that the whole effect is intellectually considered from the author’s side. Miss Flora L. Shaw (Lady Lugard), in her valuable study of Meredith, contributed to the *New Princeton Review* of March, 1887, gives the gist of a talk with him in which he had been advancing the banner of intellect. She writes :

Mr. Meredith held intellect to be the chief endowment of man, and that in him which it is most worth while to develop. ‘By intellectual courage,’ he said, ‘we make progress. Intellect is the guide of the spiritual man. Feeling and conduct are to be thought of as subordinate to it. Intellect should be our aim. It can be developed by training. The morbid and sentimental tendencies in the ordinary healthy individual can be corrected by it. Starting wrongly, a man can be brought right by it. The failure of many eminent men in old age is to be attributed to the habit of looking at life sentimentally rather than intellectually. Truth seeks truth! And we find truth by the understanding. Let the understanding be only fervid enough, and conduct will follow naturally. When we consider what the earth is and what we are, whither we tend, and why, we perceive that reason is, and must be, the supreme guide of man. Perceive things intellectually. Keep the mind open and supple. Then, as new circumstances arise, man is fit to deal with them, and to discern right and wrong.’

‘But Socrates’—and I ventured here to quote Professor Clifford’s ‘Virtue is habit.’

‘Unquestionably that applies to the moral truths already conquered. Virtue is the habit of conforming our actions to truth, once perceived. But in the life of every man and nation unforeseen circumstances arise, circumstances which are outside the ordinary, already decided laws. It is by the intellect, by the exercise of reason, that we can alone rightly deal with these. The man whose

intellect is awake will conquer new domain in the moral world. It is our only means of spiritual progress. Habits of conduct, though excellent, are insufficient. They guide us in the beaten track; when new matter presents itself they are evidently unable to deal with it.'

I wish I could recall the vivacity, the keen vigour, the wealth of wit and illustration with which he sustained his theme. As we walked along a stretch of turf on the summit of Box Hill, with the southern landscape lying pearly beneath us, and a south-east wind boisterously singing through the reddening woods upon the hill, he seemed to raise our spirits to corresponding heights, rough, pure and keen, where footing was not easy, but invigorating, and every breath was sharp and good to draw. We spoke of death. He said, 'It should be disregarded. Live in the spirit. Project your mind toward the minds of those whose presence you desire, and you will then live with them in absence and in death. Training ourselves to live in the universal, we rise above the individual.'

This leaves us in no degree of doubt as to the controlling force of Meredith's life: the force that finds expression in all his works. It also explains many things affecting the public appeal of his fiction—'Narrative is nothing,' he said to Miss Shaw; 'it is the mere vehicle of philosophy'—but that is not our immediate concern. The extraordinary feature of his worship of intellect, his belief that intellect can furnish all the moral and spiritual needs of man, is that he retains both 'sweetness and light.' Yet he has often been accused by the thoughtless of cynicism, touching which Miss Shaw observes:

It has been said, on the one hand, that he is a cynic; on the other, that he writes over the heads of the public, and is unreadable. With regard to the first accusation, it is the lot of every one who wars against sentimentalism, especially where the strokes are delivered with the Homeric vigour of Mr. Meredith's; but it is altogether unfounded. He says of himself: 'I never despair of humanity. I am an ardent lover of nature. It is therefore impossible that I should be a cynic.' The business of the novelist who aims at truth is to illustrate the variability of the human species. He must take men and women as they are, not by any means all commonplace, but with human liability to error, which heroism does not necessarily eradicate. The best men are still imperfect. To recognise this is not cynicism, while we perceive that the imperfect may also be the best.

Assuredly there is no abstraction Meredith has warred against more valiantly than 'sentiment' or 'sentimentality.' But it is a moot question whether author and reader are ever quite clear as

between them on the exact shade of meaning that is to be given to the word 'sentiment.' For this the author is perhaps as much to blame as his reader, and the very competent critic who took his text from Miss Flora Shaw's article to deliver in the *Atlantic Monthly* of June, 1887, 'A Word with Mr. George Meredith,' shows that the philosopher is tempted to push his campaign too far, while also venturing to discount somewhat Meredith's estimate of intellect as the spiritual treasure-house of man. The *Atlantic* critic puts his case in this way :

What the novelist means is plain enough, and undeniably it is true doctrine; but I would except against his using the word 'sentiment,' where what he really describes is sentimentality. Sentiment is not passion, it does not imply any deep or strong feeling, but it is something so far as it goes; its tendency may be to run into sentimentality, still it ought to be distinguished from the latter. . . .

Mr. Meredith's remedy for the cure of 'sentiment' is development of the reasoning powers, and the raising of the intellect into lordship over sensation and fancy. Here, it strikes me, he preaches a half truth only. It is indeed hard to say too much for the value of rationality in all the concerns and relations of life. Irrationality is the huge, lumbering giant against whose strength we have to contend daily, and who is overthrown now only to rise in renewed force in some other shape to-morrow. It is true that what looks like heartlessness in people is sometimes simple stupidity; yet this is not the sole root of difficulty, and Mr. Meredith, if he could invent some clever process for the sharpening of men's wits and proceed to apply it universally, might be surprised to learn that, though he had possibly destroyed false sentiment, true feeling was not invariably found to take its place. The sad fact is that many people have very little feeling at all, and it is not the most enlightened intellects that go together with the warmest and sincerest hearts. Different capacities of feeling exist in men and women, and these natural capacities are so unevenly developed! The problem is a far harder one than Mr. Meredith supposes. . . . What we want in place of false sentiment is genuine, deep, warm feeling. But where it is not, there to plant and make it grow,—tell us how to do this, O ye wise!

This would certainly be a teasing task for many Merediths! 'It is not the most enlightened intellects that go together with the warmest and sincerest hearts,' says the critic, laying his finger on the weak spot of the Meredithian intellectualism. We must all recognise that it is here Meredith's philosophy of pure reason fails. Dickens may have been a mere dealer in sentiment, occasionally in

sentimentality, but does he not gain humanwise because he is not afraid at times to be guided by his feelings, where Meredith would look for a lead to his brain only?

But it is easy to make too much of Meredith's intellectuality; the tendency is to over-emphasise it. Mr. G. M. Trevelyan coins an excellent phrase for it when he describes him as 'the inspired prophet of sanity.' Professor Oliver Elton has a fine chapter on Meredith in his 'Modern Studies.' In the course of his study he writes with real discernment on Meredith's philosophy, and I must find space here for this instructive passage:

Mr. Meredith has never struck home to them (the bigger reading public) as Dickens struck home with his splendid humanity, his uncertain art and modern education, and his true wealth of genial and farcical type. Some, too, of those devoted to Thackeray's vast and populous canvas, to his occasional classic sureness and constant elegance of speech (amidst much that is merely journalistic fiction), and to his half-dozen scenes of vehement human drama, may have shivered at the refreshing east wind and shrunk from the mountain sickness that the reader of Meredith must face. To read him is like climbing, and calls for training and eyesight; but there is always the view at the top, there are the sunrise and the upper air. Nor is such a tax always paid him willingly by the better-trained serious public of escaped and enlightened puritans, the dwindled public of George Eliot. Nor has he much in common with the novelists, English and other, of a later day.

For he, like Goethe, 'bids you hope,' while 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' and 'The Wings of the Dove' do not. The movement of later fiction is toward pessimism, and its best makers, Guy de Maupassant, Gorky, D'Annunzio, agree in their want of hopefulness if in nothing else. They have been catching up and expressing in fiction ideas that found a nobler expression, philosophical or lyrical, nearly a century ago, in Schopenhauer and Leopardi. The same discouragement lay at the base of Tolstoy's thought, before he found his peculiar salvation, and it still tinges his fiction when he forgets his creed and remembers he is an artist. The history of this pessimistic movement in fiction is still unwritten, and the movement itself is unexhausted.

But the groundwork of Mr. Meredith, with his forward look, his belief in love and courage, is different. It is stoical rather than pessimistic; and in that he resembles Zola, whose method—laborious, serried, humourless—is the opposite of his. Mr. Meredith grew up on the high hopes fed by the revolution of the mid-century, and the most heroic figure in his books is Mazzini, the 'Chief' in 'Vittoria.' He has a moral and spiritual afflatus of the nobler order, peculiarly and traditionally English, in that line of the great

English prophets which come down from Langland and Sir Thomas More to Carlyle. His creed does not depend, visibly, on formal doctrine for its force, but neither does it rest on any pre-occupying enmity towards doctrine. His inspiration plays in various moods—strenuous, ethereal, ironical—rarely serene, over his vision of ‘certain nobler races, now dimly imagined’; and casts a new interpreting light, above all, on the rarer forms of love and patriotism and friendship. Yet there are none of the airs of the prophet, for the media preferred by Mr. Meredith in his prose are wit and aphorism, situation and portraiture, and to these the lyrical didactic elements are subordinate.

One might fancy that the foregoing are among the passages referred to by the late York Powell in a very breezy and characteristic letter to Professor Elton printed in his ‘life’ of Powell, whence I quote the following; but Dr. Elton informs me that they refer to an earlier essay of his:

Balzac if you like; a thinker, an historian, an artist, a mighty labourer; but Tolstoy does not deserve comparison with Meredith. Don’t laugh, think it over, without remembering it is ‘prejudiced’ I that write this.

Well and finely done, too, the last paragraph. You might enlarge on the Earth-spirit. Try and smite out the man’s creed in one or two sentences, for he is a prophet as well as an artist. He has something to tell us: ‘we bid you to hope.’ Tolstoy, good God! a miserable nonconformist set of silly preachments. Meredith is sound like Shakespeare. Do bring in Balzac. . . . Cut out Tolstoy. Away with these half-baked potatoes. Balzac and Meredith will represent their century. Do not mention such a person as George Eliot, let her lie. She did some good work and much bad. She meant well, and she and Mrs. Grundy quarrelled, and made it up over filthy Ghetto piety. . . . I am boiling because I can’t sit opposite you to argue with. You have done a fine bit of work. I am glad you praised Henley. He is the only man who has really tried to judge G. M. W. Morris says, ‘A clever man, not an artist.’ He can’t rise above the naïve melodic.

Professor Elton was evidently not inclined to ‘away with the half-baked potatoes,’ as we have seen there is a reference to Tolstoy in his later study, as well as in the earlier one which had been submitted to Powell for criticism. But this conjunction of the names of Tolstoy and Meredith—concerning which most Meredithians will echo Powell’s lusty veto—does help to an understanding of the greater man by contrasting the feebler Russian with the magnificently energetic Briton. Meredith himself supplies us with a picture

of Tolstoy, for in a talk with Mr. G. H. Perris (*Westminster Gazette*, February 9, 1905) he delivered himself in good set terms as to the Tolstoian precept of 'non-resistance':

'I am perfectly persuaded,' he said with emphasis, 'that submission to evil is a distinct evil in itself. But I am not prepared to say that a bloody resistance is required, unless, as in this case, when a nation may be compared to a man with another holding a knife at his throat. In such a case, not to resist is grave error; and I imagine that, in the revolution of time, what the English call unmanliness proves to be a dangerous thing for men even to witness, let alone to practise. Tolstoy's is a too-easily saddened mind. Of course I recognise his power; it is a reminder to us that if a man devotes himself to one particular object he becomes a force whenever that object comes prominently before the mind of the world. But no! I don't go with him so far in his Christian precepts, though I can well understand that a brave man may feel himself under the dominion of Christ, and therefore that he would follow the lead of his Lord to the end. Tolstoy is a noble fellow, but he is *tant soit peu fanatique*. I listen to him with great reverence, sure of his sincerity, but not always agreeing with his conclusions.'

In the course of the same interview Meredith touched upon his own stoical interpretation of Nature in these words:

We are all hunted more or less. Yet Nature is very kind to all her offspring. If you are a fine runner and your blood is up, you don't, in point of fact, feel a half of what you do when lying in bed or sitting in a chair thinking about it. A man in battle array facing his enemy with his blood up is ready to give and take. If these humanitarians would only study Nature more!

We must all bear our burden in the world. True, it is a kind of world Nietzsche and other preachers of Nirvana—and our dear Tolstoy comes near them sometimes—don't approve, and even proclaim better ended. I imagine such people must have been begotten in melancholy mood—by a man in a fury with his natural appetites, and a woman reluctantly wishing for a child. Hence this singular issue, that they look upon extinction as a saving grace. It is those who are the foes of Nature. Probably many of them are of a delicate constitution, unable to rough it with the rough. So they look upon the shocks of life as though ferocious demons had been sent to work among them; the truth being that we have all come from the beasts, and the evil they talk about is nothing but the perpetual recurrence of beast-like tendencies. Those we may hope to exercise; but we cannot depart from the founts of our origin, our links with the world of Nature.

As to Death, any one who understands Nature at all thinks nothing of it. Her whole concern is perpetually to produce nourishment for all her offspring. We go that others may come—and better, if we rear them in the right way. In talking of these deep things, men too often make the error of imagining that the world was made for themselves.

In an interview with Mr. H. W. Nevinson (*Daily Chronicle*, July 5, 1904), eight months earlier than that quoted above, Meredith had also touched upon the attitude of mankind towards death, saying that 'fearlessness of death is a necessary quality,' and that it is 'essential for manliness.'

'Doctors and parsons are doing a lot of harm' (he went on) 'by increasing the fear of death and making the English less manly. No one should consider death or think of it as worse than going from one room into another. The greatest of political writers has said, "Despise your life, and you are master of the lives of others." Philosophy would say, "Conquer the fear of death, and you are put into possession of your life." I was a very timid and sensitive boy. I was frightened of everything; I could not endure to be left alone. But when I came to be eighteen, I looked round the world (as far as a youth of eighteen can look) and determined not to be afraid again. Since then I have had no fear of death. Every night when I go to bed I know I may not rise from it. That is nothing to me. I hope I shall die with a good laugh, like the old French woman. The curé came wailing to her about her salvation and things like that, and she told him her best improper story, and died. The God of Nature and human nature does not dislike humour, you may be sure, and would rather hear it in extremity than the formless official drone. Let us believe in a hearty God—one to love more than to fear.'

His tone then changed a little, and, rather as if in soliloquy, he passed into regions more remote.

'There is Pan,' he said. 'You know something about Pan, too. He has always been very close to me. He is everywhere—so is the devil, who was framed on the model of him by our mediæval instructors. Just now the devil is more thought of in England than the Christian God. He is more popular. The time will come for the mind of man to see the veritable God. Nature goes on her way, unfolding, improving, always pushing us higher; and I do not believe that this great process continues without some spiritual purpose, some spiritual force that drives it on. Change is full of hope. A friend of mine was lamenting over the sadness of autumn. "Are you sad when you change your coat?" I asked him.'



*Figures of the Household*

ONE OF MR LAWRENCE HOUSMAN'S ILLUSTRATIONS FOR  
JUNE TO GLORY JANE

Her list was Whiny Barnes a kind  
Of woman not to dine inclined





All this, though it may be described as merely the obiter dicta of an aged philosopher, deserves to be recorded, since it is in tune with the philosophy expounded in the prose and poetry, that 'stoic ecstasv' expressed in his familiar lines :

Oh, green and bounteous earth,  
Into the breast that gives the rose  
Shall I with shuddering fall?

And now the need arises for devoting particular attention to Meredith's interpretation of Nature, whose almost ~~pagan worship~~ shared with Intellect the whole passion of his being. There is much here to engage us, and as a prelude to the study of this aspect of his philosophy it is interesting to quote a passage from a long-forgotten article by the late Moncure D. Conway, contributed by him to the *Glasgow Herald*, August 14, 1883, and descriptive of his voyage round the world. Conway read 'Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth' on a 'soft July day in mid-Atlantic,' and he speaks of the book as a call to come back to old England, where are all the joys of earth, and where the wanderer may find all that he has gone in search of in his far journeyings. So Conway is led to moralise in this strain :

It may also be needful that one should circumnavigate the Earth to win what another finds by circumnavigating a dewdrop. He must have lived long and voyaged far who can explore this little book, and even understood the Joy of Earth it sings. Therefore it is too much to hope that the millions will pause to listen to this poet who, did they know it, might set their myriad footfalls to music. In these songs, fresh from the soul of this summer, George Meredith appears to me one of the few poets who greet with joy a dawn which more famous morning-stars of song meet with threnodies of fear and pain. With the unbelief revealed alike in pessimism, philosophy and panic he has simply nothing to do. Take all that belongs to you, gentlemen—so he meets the sceptic and the scientist—and I will even add all you may suspect belongs to you, myself included! What then? That skylark will sing all the vanished angels sang, heaven will smile through that child's eyes bright as through the olden stars, and the heart of the universe will not cease to beat so long as I love. There are things that live in undiminished strength when opinions of them have passed away; nay, which are even enhanced by knowledge—like that rosy cloud on which Columbus and his mariners gazed, but which proved to be the New World. Most of our opinions will be fossil remains after a time, and it would appear that experience has gradually trained the heart of man to love and seek a satisfaction in the realm which poetry

and art can actually build out of that heart's emotions and aspirations. The task of George Meredith is different from that assigned the poet by the Wordsworthian or any other school. It is not interpretation of nature as a pantheistic phenomenon; it is not to deal with nature as symbolism of another and invisible, though equally material, nature. Rather it is to detach the roses of nature from their thorns, to anticipate the evolutionary work of ages and show the far final outcome of things as if present in the joy of their vision. There is no awe, no worship of hugeness and force, but of beauty, loveliness, sweetness, and in the rapture of this worship the vileness and agonies of the earth are abolished and forgotten. Let who will deal with the evil side of nature, the inhuman side, this poet will, imaginatively, create for us a world in which all evil shall be fabulous as dragons, and ~~teach us a secret of spiritual selection by which we may surround ourselves with a harmonious order crystallised out of common quarries, like the diamond.~~ Is not this better than to turn our May-Day evil with ravings against our age, especially as the age doesn't in the least care for our ravings? Is it not the better poetic art to show what peace, hope, joy may be gathered as wayside blooms, and show every petal of them tinted with glow of the ancient heavens?

A very full and minutely considered estimate of Meredith's philosophy of nature was that contributed by Miss F. Melian Stawell to the *International Journal of Ethics*, April, 1902, entitled 'The Conception of Nature in the Poems of Meredith.' The writer begins by disposing of the false notions which have been attached to the word 'Nature' in our time, restating the chief meaning of it still current. What she chiefly aims at is the exclusion of that interpretation of nature which would have every impulse 'natural' and so make ethical chaos come again. She sets herself also to the identification of certain dimly realised impulses springing from nature and inquires why 'natural' could have become synonymous for 'good.' While reminding us that even lovers of nature are not blind to the fact that all is not beautiful in nature, she sums up by saying that 'if nature is not moral in herself, she is yet on the side of morality.' Indeed, it would not be misrepresenting Miss Stawell's roughly thrown out definitions of nature to say that it is something closely resembling Matthew Arnold's description of God: 'the enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness.' How far, if at all, this squares with the Meredithian notion of nature, we shall see. Miss Stawell thus sets forth the latter, by no means confining her inquiries to the poems, though the title of her article would give that impression:

The external world, apart from the wills of men, Meredith holds to be the manifestation of one Power, 'Nature,' a power distinct from Man and yet akin to him, akin to the best he has in him to be. And the urge in each of us towards physical life and enjoyment springs from the same source, and shows in a similar way a real connection with the Best.

Nature in us is, primarily, the force that makes for individual life, and these impulses are therefore 'natural' in the prime sense of the word. But they make for something more, and therefore they are to be called 'good' also, not good, that is, just because they are natural, but because the natural holds in it the seed of good. But the seed is, so to speak, dormant, and can only be developed by our struggle, a struggle that is not ignorant of pain and failure.

Though Meredith 'does not attempt to define with philosophical accuracy the precise relationship between these impulses and what we may call their fulfilment,' he makes it clear that these impulses 'do prompt to something beyond themselves, something that our reason could recognise as absolutely good.' One of the 'gates of life' is the physical joy or 'bodily exaltation' which lifts one towards 'the footstool of the Highest.' 'Through Nature only can we ascend,' is one of the maxims from 'The Pilgrim's Scrip':

It is in such a spirit as this (says Miss Stawell) that Whitman can celebrate 'the life of my senses and flesh, transcending my senses and flesh,' and that Wordsworth can sing of

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

Half understood, often misunderstood, again and again this belief in Nature and health comes back upon man. The Bacchanal madness may have meant little else. Such a wild guess at truth is Meredith's theme in the daring impressive grotesque he calls 'Jump-to-Glory Jane.' To Jane, the peasant founder of a Shaker Sect, jumping has become the very way of life. She has been visited with sensations of bodily health and vigour that open spiritual vistas, sensations that 'are to her as the beings of angels in her frame,' and through all the whimsical absurdity Mr. Meredith never lets us forget that

It is a lily-light she bears  
For England up the ladder-stairs.

It is not that the indulgence of the senses is a kind of pleasurable sauce to be supped now and then in a holiday mood: the senses are rather the raw material of the satisfying life: they are even more,

for they are no alien matter on which a form has to be imposed from without: of themselves they demand from their own peace a higher use: the body, as Meredith puts it, is the bride calling for the spirit who is to be the bridegroom; it is 'by her own live warmth' alone that Nature can 'be lifted out of slime.' Reason is the child of the great mother, the child who is to interpret her inarticulate cries. There is no ultimate discord in the elements of which we are made. Here on this earth we can come in sight of what Browning calls

The ultimate angel's law,  
There where life, law, joy, impulse, are one thing.

But to achieve this starry harmony man must toil; the reach, ~~the upward struggle alone can realise~~ the ideal of 'Three Singers to Young Blood,' when, from having been jarred and discordant, 'chimed they in one.' Nature alone and independent of Man is not moving towards a great ideal. Meredith has remembered what Browning said of

. . . . . how the devil spends  
A fire God gave for other ends.

when he himself sings in 'The Empty Purse':

How the God of old time will act Satan of New,  
If we keep him not straight at the higher God aimed.

And the business of life when life is 'thoroughly lived' is just this interpretation of Nature, this 'reading of Earth.' This is what it means to 'keep faith with Nature'—we are not 'wise of her prompting,' ~~we have not understood the rose of her in our blood, if it gives no birth to the 'rose in brain,' if the human Good does not blossom out of the natural.~~ Nor does Meredith leave that Good a mere abstraction, though it is not his task to give an ~~inventory of its contents.~~ ~~Sympathy and courage~~ are for him true, flowers of that immortal garland whose roots are in good gross earth.' Our problems must all be solved in 'the soul of brotherhood.' 'Not until we are driven back upon an inviolated Nature, do we call to the intellect to think radically: and then we begin to think of our fellows.' Thus it is ~~idle to dream of mere self-indulgence.~~ The man who has been deceiving himself under the pretext that he is 'made of flesh and blood' finds no answer to soothe him after he is started into a searching doubt of his 'clamorous appeals to Nature.' 'Are we, in fact, harmonious with the great Mother when we yield to the pressure of our nature for indulgence? Is she, when translated into us, solely the imperious appetite?'

Clearly no, for Meredith's plea is that, in order to correspond in the widest sense to our environment (if I may use Spencer's phrase-

ology here) we have, as Miss Stawell puts it, 'to refuse the demands of our narrow self in the name of the wider.' This ceaseless struggle with our own appetites, even against 'natural instincts,' means the winning of wisdom, but the struggle must go on, and man's conquest is the fact that he takes part in it, he is victorious in the mere wage of the battle and beaten only should he cease to fight. 'The fact that character can be and is developed by the clash with circumstances is to Meredith warrant for infinite hope.' Again I quote from Miss Stawell:

But just as the urge to life within us holds, wrapped up in it, much more than mere living, so the union with Nature means much more than this. To be in contact with natural things is to touch a source of righteousness as well as of strength. All poets, perhaps, have felt something of this faith, but Meredith makes it a corner-stone of his thinking. Wordsworth and Whitman offer the nearest parallels to his work in this as in many other points. Whitman will create his poems in the open air and test them 'by trees, stars, rivers'; he knows that system 'may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents.' True religion is taught to Wordsworth's 'wanderer' as much by 'his habitual wanderings, out of doors' as by his 'goodness and kind works.' Meredith makes a Diana who has lost her way feel that 'one morning on the Salvatore heights, would wash her clear of the webs defacing and entangling her.' In one of his most striking poems ('Earth and a Wedded Woman') a 'lone-laid wife,' tempted to weakness and inconstancy, lies awake all night after a season of drought 'to hear the rain descend,' and the mere sound and smell of the rain, the breathings from Earth's '~~heaved breast of sacred common~~ mould' of themselves bring to her strengthening that she needs. So special and marked, indeed, is the virtue that goes out of Nature that these three poets are agreed in placing it, in a sense, above what can be got from Man. Why is this? Is it just because Nature is the expression of something other, though akin, of an aspect of the whole that could not be resolved into human consciousness? The poets do not answer, but they hold unmistakably that there is something to be got from Nature which cannot be supplied elsewhere. It is doing Wordsworth wrong to explain away his outburst (in 'The Tables Turned'):

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can.

Meredith's 'South-West Wind in the Woodlands' echoes the thought, almost the very words:

speaks of 'the questions.' If they could all be answered, which they cannot be, what ultimate good should we gain? Scientific proof, if it was to be had, of life after death could not give us the inner significance of life itself.

'Strike camp and onward' is really the last word, and sums up Meredith's whole doctrine of purifying toil, while for earnest of immortality he declares—

That from flesh unto spirit man grows  
Even here on the sod under sun.

Where Meredith's teaching fails to satisfy the more orthodox among the thinkers of our time is in its avoidance of personal immortality. No craven avoidance truly; but a cold ignoring of the question as though it did not matter, and indeed, in face of the grander issues of his life's philosophy, it does not matter. The Positivist position might perhaps be likened to Meredith's, were it not that he can glow with a spiritual passion we do not discover in Comte or his followers. Concerning man's aspiration after God he is clear and unequivocal, as in this, an example of many ringing evidences of his faith:

The Great Unseen, nowise the Dark Unknown,  
To whom unwittingly did he aspire  
In wilderness, where bitter was his need:  
To whom in blindness, as an earthly seed  
For light and air, he struck through crimson mire.

But the mind of man so long schooled to dream dreams of a personal immortality, and naturally loth to lose its vision of a happy state in which the individual will continue to exist, purged of the grossness of this earth, is still some way from accepting the Meredithian creed with its light valuation of personality, its splendid enthusiasm for the race. Whether it implies a higher plane of spiritual development to be anxious only for 'man's future as part of the cosmic process,' or for one's own future; ready to make self-sacrifice for the race or merely to assure oneself a happy hereafter, does not seem to be a question capable of much discussion. This, however, the Rev. James Moffat, D.D., makes the point of his criticism of 'Mr. Meredith on Religion' in the *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1905. Dr. Moffat is a sincere and competent critic, and from his point of view his case is admirably stated in the subjoined passage:

While Meredith has no place for the idea of probation which Browning found so fruitful in the argument for immortality, he resembles that poet in the sturdy front which he inculcates as the



*By permission of Mrs. Horry Quilter.*

ONE OF MR. LAWRENCE HOUSMAN'S ILLUSTRATIONS FOR  
'JUMP-TO-GLORY JANE'

Those flies of boys disturbed them sore  
With withies cut from hedge or copse,  
They treated them as whipping tops,  
Yet all the flock jumped on the same.

[To face p. 320.]





one duty of man towards death. . . . His theory lies open to one just reproach, to the insurgent heave of human passion, which swells out, *e. g.* in Mr. Frederick Myers's poem on 'The Implicit Promise of Immortality.' Take this arresting, august protest, for example :

Oh dreadful thought! if all our sires and we  
Are but foundations of a race to be,—  
Stones which one thrusts in earth, and builds thereon  
A white delight, a Parian Parthenon  
And thither, long hereafter, youth and maid  
Seek with glad brows the alabaster shade,  
And in processions pomp together bent  
Still interchange their sweet words innocent—  
Not caring that those mighty columns rest  
Each on the ruin of a human breast—  
That to the shame the victor's chariot rolls  
Across the anguish of ten thousand souls

To Meredith this does not seem a dreadful thought at all. There is, I grant, in the closing words of 'Vittoria' and elsewhere, a slight advance upon some of his earlier utterances, but the passionate assertion of man's future as part of the cosmic progress is never supplemented by any positive or hearty word upon the deathlessness of personality. Such outcries and yearnings, indeed, he can hardly bear with patience or treat as reasonable. Insensibly, I imagine, he is swayed by the semi-pantheistic temper into an undue disparagement of the human personality, as if it necessarily involved some taint or alloy of individualism. So eager is he, as in 'The Lesson of Grief' and 'The Question Whither,' to thwart and erase the lurking selfishness of man, a selfishness which can worm its way into the holiest phases of his being, into love and grief, that he is apt to take too stunted a view of self; with the result that he fails now and then to do any sort of justice to that longing for personal immortality which is as far above any thirsty expectation of reward or fame as it lies remote from any nervous revolt of the senses. It is a longing which tenaciously refuses to admit that human personality which, on Meredith's own showing, forms so vital and supreme an expression of Nature's being, so perfect an organ of her spirit, can be treated as mere material to be eventually used up for greater issues—issues that involve a disintegration of personality and a decline from the level of its consciousness. The general heart will be up in protest. And some will prefer to quote Meredith against himself. They will venture to read humanity in the far future by the ruddy faith of the lines which he devotes to modern France—daring to hope that mankind too,

Like a brave vessel under press of steam,  
Abreast the winds and tides, on angry seas,  
Plucked by the heavens forlorn of present sun,  
Will drive through darkness, and with faith supreme  
Have sight of haven and the crowded quays.

Read 'heaven' for 'haven,' they will plead; take the vessel as the purified soul or ego; and then the voyage will satisfy the just, keen intuitions of the human soul. Not otherwise. ~~No lesser freight orth the passage.~~ When Meredith invites ~~to launch out with 'the rapture of the forward view,'~~ that is, with an ardent hope for the ultimate, collective welfare of the race; when he exults, in lines of chiselled strength and grace,

With *that* I bear my senses fraught  
Till what I am fast shoreward drives.  
They are the vessel of the Thought,  
The vessel splits, the Thought survives,

then they will be dimly conscious that, while it is wise for them to understand, and well for them to assimilate, much else in this great writer's teaching, here he is putting them off with a mist of coloured, gleaming words. For beyond the bar which he summons the soul thus cheerily to cross, it is doubtful if any Pilot is to be met face to face, and more than doubtful if any haven lies for what men learn upon these shores of time and space to prize above all price.

Dr. Moffat's is, of course, the orthodox view, and Meredith is an essential heretic. Yet nothing that the poet-philosopher has written need rob the soul that longs for continuity of that Godward urge, for surely the conduct which he has outlined for man implies as much austerity and self-abnegation as any ever demanded of him by all the prophets of a heaven of many mansions and celestial bliss for the elect. If we think over his 'reading of earth' as outlined above we shall never be conscious that it runs counter to Christ's teaching, no matter how strangely different it be phrased. Saying Meredith is a heretic, one means, of course, that his attitude is utterly independent of orthodoxy, and that orthodoxy does not imply the teaching of Christ, but the schoolmen's conventionalised interpretation of that teaching. No poet-philosopher of the nineteenth century offers the larger spirits of to-day who are breaking away the lingering trammels of mediævalism from religion such 'driving force of thought' as Meredith has dowered them with in his noble and beautiful philosophy of Nature.

Far from chilling the hopes of the heaven-aspiring soul, Meredith is the rarest tonic that soul can conceive, and simply because he has come to optimism not by shutting his eyes to the misery of the world, not by ignoring the tragedy of life—a greater tragedy than death—but ~~by seeing all and being not afraid.~~ Though it is no doubt true that we should not label Meredith 'optimist' or 'pessimist,' or any other 'ist,' since his view of life is so compre-

hensive, still when Mr. Le Gallienne calls him the only living optimist whose faith carries any conviction he conveys a notion of his outlook which is true so far as a small word can express the general sweep of a great mind facing boldly great problems. Professor M. W. MacCallum does not overstate the sustained 'uplift' of Meredith's philosophy, its lying banners of conquest, when he writes:

Meredith is terribly in earnest and unflinchingly severe, and every one of his chief persons is measured by the spiritual standard, not by any code of the conventional man, or of the natural man. Yet his books have not the melancholy undertone that we note, say, in the positivist George Eliot; there is no discord audible in them, but a full-toned harmony that subdues the jarring notes, that solemnises, but inspirits and delights. Where George Eliot sees only the irremediable in our acts, their linkage in an iron chain of cause and effect, the infinite generation of evil in a world that, after all, is not spiritual; George Meredith has trust in a power that makes even the wrath and the folly of man to praise it, and so when our misdeeds have been visited with their just reward, he can say over the grave of the erring, 'Earth makes all sweet,' and look for a harvest, not of corruption, but of life. Talking of Shakespeare's profundity of knowledge he says:

Thence came the honeyed corner at his lips,  
The conquering smile wherein his spirit sails.

I should like to apply the words to himself. Like Shakespeare of 'the bitter taste' to those who are at odds with nature, he is also like Shakespeare the 'blind and mild' to those whose spirits are in tune.

Mr. G. K. Chesterton in his paper on 'Some Aspects of George Meredith' (*Great Thoughts*, October, 1904) is, as we might expect from so vigorous a thinker and lusty knight of the pen, impressed particularly by his robust naturalness, and he makes a most interesting comparison between Meredith and Thomas Hardy in his characteristic style, when he writes:

The best example of the basic attitude on philosophy of Meredith, regarding things in general, can be found in his way of dealing with such elements in our civilisation as he conceives to be archaic or cruel, such, for instance, as the benevolent enslavement of women. And the easiest way of bringing this out is to compare him in this matter with another very great man, also a novelist, also an Englishman, and also a man in revolt against many conventions and laws. Thomas Hardy is like Meredith, that thing for

which the words Liberal and Radical are very inadequate synonyms. He is, like Meredith, particularly impressed with the tragedy of the feminine nature under existing conditions. They are both in some sense diagnosing the same problem; they both in some sense trace it to the same disease. And yet their cures are so startlingly opposite that they might be dealing, one with apoplexy, and the other with anæmia. And their two methods, large, distinct, unmistakable, are the two methods which two large, distinct, and unmistakable schools of reformers have from the beginning of the world taken towards what needed reform. When the first shaggy tribesmen differed about how to improve a wicker boat, one was Hardy and the other Meredith.

Let us suppose there is something that is in great need of improvement. Let us suppose it is the primeval wicker boat above mentioned. There is one primeval reformer whose method of reform is this. He stands and points to the boat and says, 'There is a miserable thing for you. Clumsy, unmanageable, a disgrace. I took it out this morning and it leaked in five places. I would as soon go to sea in a sieve. Let us make it better.' And there is another primeval reformer whose method of reform is to stand over the boat and speak strangely thus, 'There is a glorious thing for you; a thing that can drift and swing on the terrible waters that have no end. I took it out this morning and I felt like a god, floating in space. ~~It would be splendid to move on the face of the waters, even in a sieve.~~ This magical invention opens a vista before us; to what lands may we not go? with what swiftness may we not move? What strange fishes may not be in our nets; what strange winds in our sails? Let us make it better.' One says a thing is so bad that it must be improved. The other says it is so good that it must be improved. One is Hardy and the other Meredith.

Continuing his comparison, Mr. Chesterton illustrates it further by showing that while the one reformer would free the slave because his condition is hopeless and degraded, the other would give him liberty because, withal, 'he is a jolly fellow,' worthy of freedom, 'a man like you and me.' Equally the one would emancipate woman because she is downtrodden and kept in ignorance of her potentialities for greatness, and the other because 'even in captivity ~~she is felt to be a queen.~~' The one argues from her failure, the other from her success. 'The first reformer created Tess, and the second Rose Jocelyn.' Hence in Mr. Chesterton's opinion Meredith is 'a great and powerful paradox; he is an optimistic reformer.'

For a direct pronouncement on religion I turn to Mr. W. T. Stead's character sketch in the *Review of Reviews*, March, 1904, in the course of which he records various conversations he had been

privileged to have with Meredith. What follows is most worth noting here:

Like all serious-minded natures, Mr. Meredith is profoundly religious, although his method of phrasing his convictions would jar somewhat upon the orthodox. One of his grievances is that religion has to suffer a heavy handicap in being saddled with the burden of a multitude of beliefs and myths, which are essentially material. To him the need of presenting a more scientific aspect of religion is just as great as the importance of presenting the Christian ideal was to the Apostles who went forth to combat against the materialised conception of the anthropomorphic paganism. The idols of the market-place, the idols of the temples, have become to his thinking materialised obstacles in the way of a realisation of religion. From the Roman Catholic Church little could be expected in the way of this new reformation, but he thought Protestant ministers ought to set about the task, and especially in drawing a much broader line between the teachings of the Old Testament and the higher and more spiritual revelation of Christ.

'I see,' he said to me, 'the revelation of God to man in the history of the world, and in the individual experience of each of us in the progressive triumph of God, and the working of the law by which wrong works out its own destruction. I cannot resist the conviction that there is something more in the world than Nature. Nature is blind. Her law works without regard to individuals. She cares only for the type. To her, life and death are the same. Ceaselessly she works, pressing ever for the improvement of the type. If man should fail her, she will create some other being; but that she has failed with man I am loath to admit, nor do I see any evidence of it. It would be good for us,' he added thoughtfully, 'if we were to take a lesson from Nature in this respect, and cease to be so wrapped up in individuals, to allow our interests to go out to the race. We should all attain more happiness, especially if we ceased to care so exclusively for the individual I. Happiness is usually a negative thing. Happiness is the absence of unhappiness.'

Apart from religion and ethics, much might be written of Meredith's political faith, though of course that is of a piece with his whole philosophy. Mr. Chesterton has studied him as a reformer, and Mrs. M. Sturge Henderson, as we all know, has even written a book which deals with him chiefly as a reformer. In Mrs. Henderson's article on 'The Forward View' (*Westminster Gazette*, February 12, 1908), she gives the pith of her able and painstaking work. A few brief passages from the article in question will help to give completeness to the present chapter in which I hope no

vital feature of Meredith's teaching has been passed untouched. Mrs. Henderson writes :

Of the nature and growth of Mr. Meredith's political creed after generations, it may be ventured, will be at more pains than our own to inquire. When the history of our latest political development comes to be written, he may be discovered to have predicted and inaugurated it. . . . The story of Mr. Meredith's Radicalism is written in 'Beauchamp's Career.' 'Beauty,' he says of his hero, 'plucked the heart from his breast. But he had taken up arms, he had drunk of the *questioning* cup, that which denieth peace to us, and which projects us on the missionary search of the How, the Wherefore, and the Why not, ever *afterward*. He questioned his justification and yours, for gratifying tastes in an ill-regulated world of wrong-doing, suffering, sin, and bounties unrighteously dispensed — not sufficiently dispersed. He said *by and by to pleasure, battle to-day.*' And the object of battle is to bring beauty to the *many instead of the few.* . . . A new tide has been setting, new ideals are at work. *Society has not, as yet, control of its limbs;* but at least it knows itself as an organism, and can never again feel that the full possibilities of life have been realised in it,

Until from warmth of many breasts, that beat  
A temperate common music, sunlike heat  
The happiness not predatory sheds.

Its watchword henceforth is Community, and the future is in the hands of those who voluntarily unite with the forces that are at work in that direction. . . . The flood of democracy cannot be stayed; but if those with social advantages will but take their place in the fray and not continue to cling to obsolete privileges, the good they will get in exchange for those privileges will more than outweigh the loss of them; so much more than outweigh, Mr. Meredith thinks, that, as soon as the wealthy and powerful can be induced to see the facts, no doubt will remain in their minds as to the relative values :

'By my faith,' he declares, 'there is feasting to come,  
Revelations, delights! . . .  
. . . I can hear a faint crow  
Of the cock of fresh mornings, far, far, yet distinct.'

And this declaration of faith, this assurance of the sound, sweet heart of things, is offered to an age unburdened with consciousness of its capacity for thinking and feeling by a man of incomparable sensitiveness, a man who has faced the thickets of thought and traced impalpable horrors of nerve and sensation down to their lair.

## XIV

### JUDGED BY HIS FELLOW-NOVELISTS

PERHAPS this title is not quite the most accurate, as it suggests a packed jury summoned to pronounce on one of their fellows; and that is no proper description of this chapter. For the most part the 'judgments'—this jury has many voices and no foreman—were not intended by their utterers to have the finality of a verdict. The jury is not so much 'packed' as it is pressed, and I stand guilty of the pressing. It has, however, seemed to me worth while to examine the critical writings and ephemeræ of Meredith's fellow-novelists with a view to bringing together a selection of opinions which might be held to be interesting as much on account of those who subscribe to them as for their own intrinsic merits; more, perhaps. The unhappy condition of English letters, which forces men, against their inclinations often, to specialise in one particular branch of literary production, has banished that universality which the French, for instance, reasonably account one of their glories. It pays to write novels when once you have caught your public; it pays to write only that particular brand of novel with which you have fluked into popularity; and so we have the melancholy spectacle of many able English writers continually straining to produce new books on the lines of their lucky ones. The English novelists who can or do write decent criticism are singularly few; there are some who, before they won fame with fiction, did write good criticism, and others, again, who have deserted criticism and *belles lettres* to chase the elusive sprite of Fiction none too successfully. The consequence is that, having set myself the theme indifferently expressed by the title of this chapter, diligent research has left me with no great matter to furnish it forth; but even so there is enough of interest to justify its inclusion in the present work.

Where the word 'judged' is scarcely appropriate is in such a case as R. L. Stevenson's perhaps loosely-delivered opinion recorded by a correspondent of the *San Francisco Examiner* in July, 1888, who



had a conversation with the novelist on his setting-out for the South Seas. But what Stevenson then said has often been quoted; and he spoke to this effect:

I am a true blue Meredith person. I think George Meredith out and away the greatest force in English letters, and I don't know whether it can be considered a very encouraging thing that he has now become popular or whether we should think it a very discouraging thing that he should have written so long without any encouragement whatever. It is enough, for instance, to disgust a man with the whole trade of letters that such a book as 'Rhoda Fleming' should have fallen flat; it is the strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died, and if Shakespeare could have read it he would have jumped and cried, 'Here's a fellow!' No other living writer of English fiction can be compared to Meredith. He is the first, and the others—are not he. There is Hardy, of course. I would give my hand to write like Hardy. I have seen sentences of his that I don't think could be bettered in any writer or in any language. Still, I serve under Meredith's colours always.

Stevenson was an enthusiast; he did nothing by halves, but had he been writing a studied criticism instead of entertaining an 'interviewer' he might have given a touch of sobriety to certain of the foregoing phrases. Yet they are warm and hearty, and were no doubt spoken in all sincerity. They are a noble tribute from one great man of letters to another still greater.

Of his fellow-novelists who have passed away and who have written of Meredith, I think few had more potentialities of greatness than David Christie Murray. There was a born story-teller, a man who might have won a real niche of fame, who came within sight of the highest at times and went out a failure. Murray had a splendid forthright style which gave distinction to his somewhat egotistical work, 'My Contemporaries in Fiction,' from which I quote the following characteristic passage:

It is not likely that in the broad sense he will ever become a popular writer, for the mass of novel-readers are an idle and pleasure-loving folk, and no mere idler and pleasure-seeker will read Meredith often or read him long at a time. The little book which the angel gave to John of Patmos, commanding that he should eat it, was like honey in the mouth, but in the belly it was bitter. To the reader who first approaches him, a book of Meredith's offers an accurate contrast to the roll presented by the angel. It is tough chewing, but in digestion most suave and fortifying. The people who instantly enjoy him, who relish him at a first bite, are rare.

From  
Frank Merrett  
Box Pitt.  
Dorling

## Jump-to-Glory Jane

i

A Revelation came on Jane,  
The vision of a labouring swain.  
And first his body trembled sharp,  
Then all the woman was a harp  
With winds along the strings; she heard  
Though there was neither tone nor word.

ii.

For fast our hearing was the ear,  
Beyond our speaking what it bore.

[Acquisition of Messrs. Sotheby and Mr. J. T. Sabin]

FACSIMILE OF MEREDITH'S MANUSCRIPT



Personally, I am not one of the happy few. I am at my third reading of any one of Meredith's later books before I am wholly at my ease with it. I can find a most satisfying simile (to myself). A new book of Meredith's comes to me like a hamper of noble wines. I know the vintages, and I rejoice. I set to work to open the hamper. It is corded and wired in the most exasperating way, but at last I get it open. That is my first reading. Then I range my bottles in the cellar—port, burgundy, hock, champagne, imperial tokay; subtle and inspiring beverages, not grown in common vineyards, and demanding to be labelled. That is my second reading. Then I sit down to my wine, and that is my third; and in any book of Meredith's I have a cellarful for a lifetime. . . .

Modern science can put the nutritive properties of a whole ox into a very modest canister. Meredith's best sentences have gone through just such a digestive process. He is not for everybody's table, but he is a pride and a delight to the pick of English epicures.

The late James MacLaren Cobban was a novelist of lesser mould than Murray, but a critic of distinction, as those familiar with his work under Henley's banner in the old *Scots Observer* will recall. There he wrote (September 28, 1889) the study of Meredith in the series of 'Modern Men,' and from this I select what follows:

What excellences give George Meredith his peculiar position among his admirers? To speak of them, to examine them is to contend with a great *embarras de richesses*. There are plenty now-a-days to vote the literature of the Rowdy Boy immortal in itself and the wine of life, the only true elixir for every one in mental health. But, the Babel of them notwithstanding, the constant value in fiction is the manifestation of human nature—human nature sounded from the lowest even to the very top of its register. What is commonly called 'character'—character in action—is the perennially interesting thing, and when to character is added right emotion, then the novel may be great. Viewed from this point of vantage the work of Meredith stands fair and full above that of all but the best. What shapes arise as you recall it! Not puppets stuffed and stiff-jointed, not vague and floating shadows, but full-bodied, full-blooded creations, moving in a living world without exaggeration, yet with all the free action of life and instinct with the fire and breath of life! . . .

When George Meredith fails—as in Shrapnel, Old Antony, Mr. Raikes, and the like—he fails prodigiously: not trailing clouds of glory, but running into avalanches of sawdust. But the best of his characters reveal an amazing insight into human nature, and a knowledge wide and deep of the springs of human action. . . . His passion ravishes, and his pathos melts; you would like his good men for friends and neighbours, and the successes among his women for

sweethearts and wives : he is not pre-eminently a humorist, but he sometimes makes you laugh ; and if he hath a devil of wit, and would liefer die than submit to exorcism, his wisdom (which is neither of the ascetic nor of the worldling, but of the man who commands the secret of both) instructs, enlightens, even fortifies. As for genius, it is recorded of Thackeray that as he sat writing that immortal scene of Becky and the Marquis and the avenging Rawdon, at a certain instant of creation he slapped his hand upon the table, and said he, ' By — that genius ! ' Well, such instants are broadcast in Meredith, and when a man can have all these differences in an author, what more can he want for his amusement and delight, what more for his reproof and instruction ?

The author of ' Lorna Doone ' was very far from being prone to pass judgment on his fellows of the pen, with whom he held less converse than any author of his time, so that the passage from a letter of his quoted by Mr. James Baker in ' Literary and Biographical Sketches ' is the more interesting for that reason. Touching the election of Meredith as President of the Authors' Society Blackmore wrote :

I think Meredith was the right man for President, failing Ruskin and Mr. Besant. I should have voted for Meredith. Not that I care for his books, the style is too jerky and tangled, and structure involved, and tone too dictatorial for my liking. Still, he is emphatically an author's author, and the best men admire him beyond all others, and so I conclude that my judgment is wrong.

We have already ascertained Mr. Justin McCarthy's views on certain aspects of Meredith's art, but here I have reserved for quotation a general estimate of the novelist, in which, while we can plainly see a warm admirer of Meredith, Mr. McCarthy steadily refuses to allow his personal pleasure to modify his criticism. We have to remember that what I am about to quote was written in Mr. McCarthy's *Westminster Review* article of July, 1864, and revised for his ' Con Amore ' in 1868, thus being a judgment that preceded the writing of ' Harry Richmond,' ' Beauchamp,' ' Diana,' ' Lord Ormont,' and other important works of Meredith's essential to a final verdict. On the other hand Mr. McCarthy was probably familiar with ' Rhoda Fleming,' and as that is unquestionably Meredith's masterpiece *quâ* ' story ' he would possibly find little to revise in the following, even after forty years :

His works, as a whole, reveal undoubtedly the operations of a mind endowed with great and genuine power ; of a quick, sensitive, feeling nature ; of a rich and sometimes a prodigal fancy ; of an

intellect highly cultured, and matured by much observation. Still, the books are hardly to be called successful in themselves. They exhibit a combination of faculties entirely above the ordinary range, they are distinguished by a freedom from the commonplace rare indeed in our days; and they have the power to set the reader thinking more often and more deeply than even the productions of greater intellects can always do. But the intellectual man predominates in them; and therefore they are no great works of fiction. The fusing heat of emotion which melts the substances of a novel into one harmonious and fluent whole is wanting. The glow of absolute genius is never felt. The moment of projection never arrives; the several substances never combine into the golden mass; they remain cold, solid and individual to the last. The reader is never carried away by the story; he never loses sight of the narrator, he never for a moment feels as if he were moving among the people of the novel, sharing their trials and their joys. Mr. Meredith falls into the common error of intellectual men who go about to construct a story upon purely intellectual principles. It is not enough to draw men and women with vigorous and life-like touches. Mr. Meredith has done this in many instances with entire success. Emilia is a character wholly new to literature, and painted with consummate skill. Adrian, the Wise Youth of 'Richard Feverel,' is such a picture as Bulwer in his brightest days might have been proud to own. It is not enough to have a keen observance of the shades of human feeling; it is not enough to write eloquently, epigrammatically and pathetically; to have a racy faculty of humour; even to have deep feelings of the capacity to express it in words and scenes. All these faculties, or most of them, are essential to the entire success of a novelist. But besides all these, there is something else needed. These are the ingredients; but there must likewise be the capacity to combine and fuse them into one harmonious whole. There must be, in fact, the story-teller's essential faculty—the capacity to tell a story.

Mr. Meredith always seems to write with a purpose. He is always apparently meditating on some phase of human life, some tendency of human nature, some melancholy confusion or misdirection of human effort; and his whole soul is not in the work itself but in something behind it, and of which it only faintly shadows out the reality and the meaning. He is too much of a thinking man; he needs the spirit which abandons itself wholly to the work, becomes lost in it, and has for the time no *arrière-pensée*, indeed no individual existence apart from it. The critical faculty is too strong in him, and therefore, even when he begins to grow earnest, he forthwith sets about to analyse this very earnestness, and it naturally vanishes in the effort. 'I have never thought about thinking,' says Goethe. Mr. Meredith seems almost always to think about thinking.

Mr. Hall Caine is another novelist who began his career of letters as a critic and speedily deserted criticism for creative literature, as it is called—though why any more ‘creative’ than the best class of criticism it would baffle some novelists to explain—when ‘The Shadow of a Crime’ very honestly won for him a footing in fiction. Since 1885 he has written little by way of criticism, but in ‘The New Watchwords of Fiction,’ in the *Contemporary* of April, 1890, he makes an incidental reference to Meredith that may justify the inclusion of the paragraph here :

We are asked to say how fiction can live against such conditions of the circulating libraries as degrade a serious art to the level of the nursery tale. The answer is very simple : English fiction has lived against them, and produced meantime the finest examples of its art that the literature of the world has yet seen. Unlike the writers who pronounce so positively on the inferiority of fiction in England, I cannot claim to know from ‘back to end’ the great literatures of Europe ; but I will not hesitate to say that not only would the whole body of English fiction bear the palm in a comparison with the whole body of the fiction of any other country, but the fiction of England during the past thirty years (when its degeneracy, according to its critics, has been most marked) has been more than a match for the fiction of the rest of the world. Indeed, I will be so bold as to name six English novels of that period, and ask if any other such bulk of work, great in all the qualities that make fiction eminent—imagination, knowledge of life, passion and power of thought—can be found among the literatures of France, Russia, or America. The six novels are ‘Daniel Deronda,’ ‘The Cloister and the Hearth,’ ‘Lorna Doone,’ ‘The Woman in White,’ ‘The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,’ and ‘Far from the Madding Crowd.’ All these novels are products of romanticism, and the circumstance that they were written amid the hampering difficulties that are said to beset the feet of fiction is proof enough that where power is not lacking in the artist there is no crying need for licence in the art.

In January of the same year as Mr. Hall Caine’s article was published, Dr. Conan Doyle (as we then knew him) contributed a carefully studied paper to the *National Review* on ‘Mr. Stevenson’s Methods in Fiction,’ in the course of which he incidentally throws out a judgment on Meredith when examining how far the elder novelist has influenced the younger, his avowed disciple. He writes as follows :

Meredith was made to be imitated. His mission is not so much to tell stories himself, as to initiate a completely new method in

the art of fiction, to infuse fresh spirit into a branch of literature which was in much need of regeneration. His impatient and audacious genius has refused to be fettered by conventionalities. He has turned away from the beaten and well-trod track, and has cleared a path for himself through thorny and doubtful ways. Such a pioneer would have worked in vain were there not younger men who were ready to follow closely in his steps, to hold what he has gained, and to strike off from it to right and to left. It is a safe prophecy to say that for many generations to come his influence will be strongly felt in fiction. His works might be compared to one of those vast inchoate pyramids out of which new-comers have found materials wherewith to build many a dainty little temple or symmetrical portico. To say that Stevenson was under the influence of Meredith is no more than to say that he wrote in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and was familiar with the literature of his day.

Mr. J. M. Barrie wrote many admirable essays in criticism before the novel claimed his energies, as the stage has later ousted the novel. I have already had occasion to refer to his study of Meredith's novels in the *Contemporary* of October, 1888, and although it is difficult to detach from that any critical summing-up on Meredith's art in general, it is interesting to discover what is Mr. Barrie's opinion of the highest attainment of the novelist in the creation of character. This, concerning Roy Richmond, will serve to show us pretty clearly where Mr. Barrie would place Meredith:

To me Harry Richmond's father is Mr. Meredith's most brilliant creation. What novelist has not worked the 'adventurer'? In Dickens he is a low comedian or a heavy villain, coloured as only the most richly endowed imagination ever novelist had could put on colour, always warranted to draw laughter or a shudder. Thackeray's Barry Lyndon is a more enduring study, one of the author's greatest triumphs, yet Roy Richmond is, I think, a greater. They are in different worlds, and to compare them would be folly. Barry, with all his exaggeration, is the more true to life; he is the adventurer vulgarised till he is human; while Richmond, the fantastic, in fiction the 'greatest, meanest of mankind,' a dreamer of magnificent dreams, one who cannot bring his mind back to the present, is a comedy figure. This dweller in the future is a strangely romantic conception from beginning to end of his wonderful life, and his death is not to be forgotten. The most tenderly pathetic scene in fiction is probably Colonel Newcome's death, but the most impressive is the death of Roy Richmond. Tragedy rings down the curtain. . . . Thackeray admitted that when he had written a



certain great scene in 'Vanity Fair' he felt that it was genius. We are as far as ever from a definition of genius, a word not to be lightly used, but there are some unmistakable instances of it, and I cannot think that Roy Richmond is not one of them.

Mr. George Moore, the author of 'Esther Waters,' in his 'Confessions of a Young Man,' published in 1888, tells us that he had been an admirer of Meredith's poetry, but when he turned to his prose and took up 'The Tragic Comedians,' expecting for the poet's novels one of his 'old passionate delights,' he was 'painfully disappointed.' He conditions his criticism, however, by observing that 'emotionally' he does not understand Meredith and 'all except an emotional understanding is worthless in art.' He seems dimly to recognise him as a personality, but the reading of his prose makes him feel so hopelessly out of sympathy with the author that he doubts if he can criticise him in the true sense. Clearly it is the Meredithian 'style' that is to blame, in the first place, as Mr. Moore goes on to say:

In Balzac, which I know by heart, in Shakespeare, which I have just begun to love, I find words deeply impregnated with the savour of life; but in George Meredith there is nothing but crackjaw sentences, empty and unpleasant in the mouth as sterile nuts. I could select hundreds of phrases which Mr. Meredith would probably call epigrams, and I would defy any one to say they were wise, graceful or witty. I do not know any book more tedious than 'Tragic Comedians,' more pretentious, more blatant; it struts and screams, stupid in all its gaud and absurdity as a cockatoo. More than fifty pages I could not read. . . .

I took up 'Rhoda Fleming.' I found some exquisite bits of description in it, but I heartily wished them in verse, they were motives for poems; and there was some wit. I remember a passage very racy indeed, of middle-class England. Antony, I think is the man's name, describes how he is interrupted at his tea; a paragraph of seven or ten lines with 'I am having my tea, I am at my tea,' running through it for refrain. Then a description of a lodging-house dinner: 'a block of bread on a lonely plate, and potatoes that looked as if they had committed suicide in their own steam.' A little ponderous and stilted, but undoubtedly witty. I read on until I came to a young man who fell from his horse, or had been thrown from his horse, I never knew which, nor did I feel enough interest in the matter to make research; the young man was put to bed by his mother, and once in bed he began to talk! . . . four, five, six, ten pages of talk, and such talk! I can offer no opinion why Mr. George Meredith committed them to paper; it is not narrative, it is not witty, nor is it sentimental, nor is it

profound. I read it once; my mind astonished at receiving no sensation cried out like a child at a milkless breast. I read the pages again . . . did I understand? Yes, I understood every sentence, but they conveyed no idea, they awoke no emotion in me; it was like sand, arid and uncomfortable. The story is surprisingly commonplace—the people in it are as lacking in subtlety as those of a Drury Lane melodrama.

‘Diana of the Crossways’ Mr. Moore liked better, and, had he been absolutely idle, might have read it through; but judged by the final test of all fiction, ‘the creation of a human being,’ he found it a failure. ‘Into what shadow has not Diana floated?’ he exclaims. He does not state how far he bore her company, but perhaps the suggestion is that if she could not induce him to follow her to the end she was indeed a phantom. He could find nothing in the work to be mentioned with Balzac; an opinion to which many sincere admirers of Meredith might be willing to subscribe. And he thus pronounces on the novelist’s failure—as he considers it—to realise the character of Diana:

With tiresome repetition we are told that she is beautiful, divine; but I see her not at all, I don’t know if she is dark, tall, or fair; with tiresome reiteration we are told that she is brilliant, that her conversation is like a display of fireworks, that the company is dazzled and overcome; but when she speaks the utterances are grotesque, and I say that if any one spoke to me in real life as she does in the novel, I should not doubt for an instant that I was in the company of a lunatic.

There is a certain charm of style about Mr. Moore’s very frank expression of his dislike for Meredith, and modified as it all is by his avowed lack of sympathy with, and his emotional distance from, the object of his criticism—a premise difficult of admission—it might still pass for an attempt at criticism; but when he roundly declares that ‘Mr. Meredith’s conception of life is crooked, ill-balanced, and out of tune,’ even the most lukewarm Meredithian will protest that Mr. Moore might at least have read several of the novels to the bitter end—so to say—before venturing on a generalisation so sweeping and unsupportable. Yet withal, after suggesting that Mr. Meredith resembles a man who does a lot of shouting and gesticulating but utters little worthy of notice, he can find it in his heart to call him an artist. ‘His habit is not slatternly,’ he writes, ‘like those of such literary hodmen as Mr. David Christie Murray, Mr. Besant, Mr. Buchanan. There is no trace of the crowd about him. I do

not question his right of place. I am out of sympathy with him, that is all; and I regret that it should be so, for he is one whose love of art is pure and untainted with commercialism, and if I may praise it for nought else, I can praise it for this.'

There is some very sound criticism in 'Letters to Living Authors,' which Mr. John A. Steuart wrote eighteen years ago, ere he, too, deserted the art of criticism for that of fiction. Mr. Steuart addresses seventeen English and American authors then living, of whom ten have now passed away, and the place of honour is given to Meredith. In Mr. Steuart's views of Meredith there is nothing particularly fresh to any one who has followed the whole stream of criticism so closely as we have in this work; but he writes so engagingly, putting certain long-accepted opinions in a new and effective way, that I venture on the following quotation from his 'letter':

You have been quixotical enough to remain steadfastly true to your early ideals. You have given the world, not what it wanted, but what you thought was good for it. You have put intellect into every sentence you have written, reckless of consequences, therein departing very far indeed from the glorious traditions of English fiction. To say the truth, I think you have been too lofty in your contempt of the rights and prerogatives of that well-meaning and not ill-deserving, in not very intelligent, individual, the habitual novel-reader. Other novelists may occasionally take the bit between their teeth, as it were, and indulge in a gallop to please themselves, but they quickly slacken down to the conventional ambling pace, and make everything comfortable for the party in the saddle. To change the metaphor, they mostly dilute their draught of thought to suit the taste of consumers; but you stubbornly persist in for ever giving yours over-proof, perfectly indifferent if people turn away gasping. That is not the way to be popular, and indeed you are at opposite poles from one's ideal of a popular writer.

Your only commodity is thought, which is not in any great demand in the present era. You made a mistake at the beginning, and, less discriminating than many who are your inferiors, you have never seen it. All along you have gone on the assumption that the world is craving for more light, whereas it is rather obscurity and forgetfulness it is seeking. You fancied that on certain weighty and perplexing problems, which lay very near your heart, mankind was pining for enlightenment, and, with the noble audacity of a generous and gifted soul, you undertook to make things clear; and you have succeeded but too well. That is, you have led the reading public to understand that you are a moral and social reformer, and not a story-teller. But for the ample proof to the contrary contained

in your works, your policy might lead one to think that you know little or nothing of human nature. Your course, in a worldly sense, has been the height of inexpediency. . . . When writers, without a twentieth part of your gifts or your culture, have been shooting aloft into fortune, and what is temporarily taken for fame, you have remained toiling in comparative obscurity, no doubt eagerly panting for appreciation, yet determined to bate not one jot of your independence, or in the smallest particular prove a traitor to your ideal. Happily there are signs that the long-delayed victory is coming at last, that you are gaining recognition, or, to use a cant phrase of criticism, that you 'are swimming into the ken of culture.'

In Mr. Coulson Kernahan's remarkable and beautiful book, 'A Dead Man's Diary,' I find the following noteworthy passage :

I do not know whether the literary associations of the room had any part—probably they had—in determining the current of my thought, but I remember that, during the first few hours of the morning preceding my death, I found my mind running on poets and poetry. I recollect that I was thinking chiefly of Rossetti, and of the fact that he was haunted, as he lay a-dying, by passages from his own poems. Not that I saw or see any cause in that fact for wonder, for I can recall lines of his which I can believe would haunt one even in heaven.

Those of my readers who fail to appreciate in its fulness the saying of 'Diana of the Crossways,' that in poetry 'those that have souls meet their fellows,' or that of the *Saturday Review*, that 'there is an incommunicable magic in poetry which is foolishness to the multitude,'—may think this an exaggeration. Ah well, they are of the 'multitude,'—the more pity for them!—and can never understand how the soul is stirred by a simple sentence in the godlike language of Shakespeare, or is as irresistibly swayed as are trees in a whirlwind by a single stanza from Swinburne; how the magic witchery of a couplet by Keats can bring tears to the eyes; or how the tender grace of a line from Herrick can set the senses vibrating with an exquisite thrill of joy. Nay, I could indicate sentences in the diamond-pointed prose of George Meredith, pellucid sentences, crystal-clear and luminous as the scintillations of Sirius (and for all their judicial poise and calmness emitted like the Sirius scintillations at a white heat), which affect me in a similar way. There are few other writers of whom I could affirm this with the like confidence; but Meredith's thoughts have crystallised into a brain-stimulating prose—every sentence of which is a satisfying mouthful to our intellectual hunger—which is sometimes pure poetry.

Mr. Neil Munro, the author of 'John Splendid,' writes as follows in the course of a study of Meredith in *Britannia*, July, 1904 :

The hour of perfect harmony, when inspiration, argument, and style were in the happiest accord, seems to have come to Mr. Meredith, when—that amazing corybantic Eastern performance, 'The Shaving of Shagpat,' accomplished, doubtless to the artistic joy and profit of himself, if not very much to the edification of the early fifties—he tamed his heart of fire and produced 'Richard Feverel.' The world, which, given an adequate period for reflection, is always right in its estimates of art, has, in half a century, grown to love 'Richard Feverel' above all others of Mr. Meredith's books, and I think it will remain obstinately in that preference, despite the hectorings and the lecturings of the professional critic. We listen patiently to the protestations of the elect that the later Meredith is obscure only for indolent and unable intellects, and that his early work was tentative; we confess the marvellous nature of his analysis of a complex Society, the mordant wit of his dialogues, the truth of his observations of the mind of man and woman, and the uniqueness of his imagination, all as displayed in the noble array of books that stand to his credit, but it does not alter our conviction that his golden hour was the hour of 'Richard Feverel,' when he wrote of love from a full young heart, and cherished his feelings more than his phrases.

In 'Richard Feverel' we have the essence of all the author's gifts as a novelist. It is a story flowing with spring winds, odorous with flowers, touched with Pagan delight in earth and rude elemental things, abounding, despite its tragic conclusion, in that grave optimism which is not wanting in his very latest work. . . . 'Richard Feverel' also indicated the danger into which its creator was apt to fall. The lucidity of its telling was sometimes marred—as we must humbly think—by a device of concealing the most ordinary information in fantastical language.

Withal he remains the most brilliant and ingenious novelist of his age. . . . In the work of no other novelist is conversation so consistently pitched on a high key and so limited to the essentials. The right instinct for a dramatic situation is ever his, and there is rich arterial blood in all his characters.

Another of the younger generation of novelists, Mr. H. B. Marriott Watson, thus sums up a brief study of Meredith published in the *Daily Mail*, November 2, 1907;

Our conceptions of fiction have sensibly altered during the last sixty years, yet we do not judge the pioneers of the Grand Manner by our later canons. We keep Dickens and Thackeray upon their pedestals, as we do Scott and Fielding. George Meredith is in the same category. In the face of his construction, or his mannerisms, or his volubility, for instance, we are mute. All that matters is the light and life that leap from his pages. It is an affair of genius

only, where animadversion of mere manner or style fails. We judge him by his galleries, the great dramaturgist of our times. And never was there so vast and varied an assemblage since Shakespeare. Do you remember the Miss Poles? And do you remember Lucy? And do you remember Rhoda? . . . A great range of diverging womanhood lies between these extremes. And in the last resort one must judge a novelist by his women. Their creation is his greatest task.

With the foregoing opinions of his fellow-novelists before us, it is more than ever evident how completely Meredith had won his fellows of the pen to his side. As Shelley was called the poets' poet, so may Meredith be named the novelists' novelist.

## XV

### HIS PLACE IN LITERATURE

WE can hope to define this only so far as criticism may be prophetic, no more. This is not a great way, it will be said; but it is as far as erring man may go, reasoning from premises which he establishes too often to suit the end he aims at. Yet criticism as a whole is by no means so futile in its forecasts as the critic in his bilious moods would have us believe, excepting always himself—and perhaps St. Beuve!—as papal in his infallibility. Nor is English criticism in a bad way just now, any more than it was when Meredith first assaulted its exponents with his new creed and his newer expression thereof. There are times when I am tempted—as one who has read not a little in modern criticism—to think that the standard of English critical writing in our country has been equal to that of the creative literature during the last half century. To-day, indeed, it is not too much to say that the criticism of prose fiction is on the whole superior to the literature it examines. Take a review of the latest novel in the *Times*, or the *Westminster Gazette*, or in almost any of the better-class dailies, and you will probably find it is written with more literary grace, a finer savour of style, a wider acquaintance with letters, than you will discover in the book it criticises, perhaps appreciatively. There is a notion gaining ground that if a man can ‘spin a yarn’ he is a better fellow than the ablest critic, even though he does not know the rudiments of grammar and could not save his neck, were he put to it, by composing a paragraph of decent English. To this pass has the amazing popularity of the novel brought us, so that a word for criticism would be in season.

But to return to the subject in hand, it may be said that whatever failures in prophecy can be laid at the door of literary criticism, out of the glowing mass of opinions we can always strike shape into something that will stand for the essence of these opinions and provide ourselves with an approximation to truth, or at least to wisdom, which itself only approximates to truth. That is what I

purpose attempting here; but in an effort of this kind the reader must co-operate by forming for himself some general opinion from the views it is my task to bring together. If, at the end, the reader finds an idea disengage itself from the whole that refuses to join hands with the main idea I have taken from the same source, I shall say no more than that the 'personal equation,' which makes it impossible for two men to give precisely the same report of the same occurrence half-an-hour after it happened, operates here, as it does throughout the whole field of critical opinion.

Swinburne is a good judge to start with. In 'A Note on Charlotte Brontë,' published in 1877, he wrote:

Perhaps we may reasonably divide all imaginative work into three classes: the lowest, which leaves us in a complacent mood of acquiescence with the graceful or natural inventions and fancies of an honest and ingenious workman, and in no mind to question or dispute the accuracy of his transcript from life or the fidelity of his design to the modesty and the likelihood of nature; the second, of high enough quality to engage our judgment in its service, and make direct demand on our grave attention for deliberate assent or dissent. . . . Of the second order our literature has no more apt and brilliant examples than George Eliot and George Meredith.

Oscar Wilde, in one of his subtlest essays, that on 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (*Fortnightly*, February, 1891), in a few deft and telling touches gives the verdict of one man of genius on another thus:

One incomparable novelist we have now in England, Mr. George Meredith. There are better artists in France, but France has no one whose view of life is so large, so varied, so imaginatively true. There are tellers of stories in Russia who have a more vivid sense of what pain in fiction may be. But to him belongs philosophy in fiction. His people not merely live, but they live in thought. One can see them from myriad points of view. They are suggestive. There is soul in them and around them. They are interpretative and symbolic. And he who made them, those wonderful quickly-moving figures, made them for his own pleasure, and has never asked the public what they wanted, has never cared to know what they wanted, has never allowed the public to dictate to him or influence him in any way, but has gone on intensifying his own personality, and producing his own individual work. At first none came to him. That did not matter. Then the few came to him. That did not change him. The many have come now. He is still the same. He is an incomparable novelist.



Two years earlier the same critic had written of the same novelist in a colloquy which is famous as one of the most brilliant examples of his style and went far to establish his fame as a writer of paradox. I refer, of course, to 'The Decay of Lying,' contributed by Oscar Wilde to the *Nineteenth Century*, January, 1889, and reprinted in 'Intentions.' Subjoined are the paragraphs of immediate import:

*Cyril.* . . . I also cannot help expressing my surprise that you have said nothing about the two novelists whom you are always reading, Balzac and George Meredith. Surely they are realists, both of them?

*Vivian.* Ah! Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything, except articulate. Somebody in Shakespeare—Touchstone, I think—talks about a man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit, and it seems to me that this might serve as the basis for a criticism of Meredith's method. But whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal, and after all, even if the man's fine spirit did not revolt against the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at a respectful distance. By its means he has planted round his garden a hedge full of thorns, and red with wonderful roses.

Again, in 'The Critic as Artist,' in the same volume, occurs this most characteristic deliverance of Wilde's, though he places it in the mouth of a lay figure:

Yes, Browning<sup>d</sup> was great. And as what will he be remembered? As a poet? Ah, not as a poet! He will be remembered as a writer of fiction, as the most supreme writer of fiction, it may be, that we have ever had. His sense of dramatic situation was unrivalled, and, if he could not answer his own problems, he could at least put problems forth, and what more should an artist do? Considered from the point of view of a creator of character he ranks next to him who made Hamlet. Had he been articulate, he might have sat beside him. The only man who can touch the hem of his garment is George Meredith. Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose.

Turn we now for a moment from the dazzle of Wilde's paradox, his wise and allowable affectations, his studied cleverness enclosing genuine criticism, to a forthright critic of the old-fashioned 'plain-

Jane-and-no-nonsense ' school—the late H. D. Traill. So long ago as 1875—when 'Beauchamp's Career' was appearing in the *Fortnightly*—he wrote as follows, in the *Nineteenth Century* of October, on 'The Novel of Manners':

The novel of modern life and society, in so far as it does not rely for its attractions on mere sensational incident, is generally a study of male and female character—mostly, indeed, of one male and one female character—with a few elaborate sketches of scenery for a background, and a clumsy caricature of some two or three well-known contemporary personages thrown in to give it an air of actuality. The close objective study of social *types*—not of their superficial peculiarities only, but of their inner being—appears to be becoming a lost art. Where, indeed, are we to look for the observation, the humour, to say nothing of the *wisdom*, which was brought to bear upon this branch of the art of fiction by its great masters in the past? We have but one living novelist with the adequate intellectual equipment; but Mr. George Meredith is poet, philosopher and politician, as well as novelist, and we must be satisfied, I suppose, that brilliant studies of manners form an element, and an element only, in his varied and stimulating work. For the rest, we have 'pretty' writers in abundance, and a few of genuine power in the creation of individual character. But the generalising eye, the penetrative humour, and the genial breadth of sympathy, which is needed to portray the social pageant as a whole, appear to be gifts which are becoming rarer and rarer among us every day.

The comparison with Browning which Oscar Wilde made so neatly is perhaps the commonest of the commonplaces of Meredith criticism. The late James Thomson ('B. V.') in an essay on the occasion of the one volume issue of 'Richard Feverel' advanced it thus, in *Cope's Tobacco Plant*, May, 1879:

He may be termed, accurately enough, for a brief indication, the Robert Browning of our novelists; and his day is bound to come, as Browning's at length has come. The flaccid and feeble folk, who want literature and art that can be inhaled as idly as the perfume of a flower, must naturally shrink from two such earnestly strenuous spirits, swifter than eagles, stronger than lions, in whom, to use the magnificent and true language of Coleridge concerning Shakespeare, 'The intellectual power and the creative energy wrestle as in a war-embrace.' But men who have lived and observed and pondered, who love intellect and genius and genuine passion, who have eyes and ears ever open to the mysterious miracles of nature and art, who flinch not from keenest insight into the world and life, who are wont to probe and analyse with patient subtlety

## GEORGE MEREDITH

the intricate social and personal problems of our complex quasi-civilisation, who look not to mere plot as the be-all and end-all of a novel reflecting human character and life, who willingly dispense with the childish sugar-plums of so-called poetical justice which they never find dispensed in the grown-up work-o'-day world, who can with thought to thought, and passion to passion, and imagination to imagination; and, lastly, who can appreciate a style vital and plastic as the ever-evolving living world it depicts, equal to all the emergencies, which can revel with clowns and fence with fine ladies and gentlemen, yet rise to all grandeurs of Nature and Destiny and the human soul in fieriest passion and action: such men, who cannot abound anywhere, but who should be less rare among meditative smokers than in the rest of the community, will find a royal treasure-house of delight and instruction and suggestion in the works of George Meredith.

Whereas Browning is esteemed a prosateur struggling with poetry for his medium, Mr. Arthur Symons would have it that Meredith is a poet trammelled by prose, if I correctly interpret the concluding paragraph of his 'Note on George Meredith' in the *Fortnightly*, November, 1897. And observe the recurrence of the Browning comparison in Mr. Justin McCarthy's estimate of Meredith in 'A History of Our Times,' from which I quote below the general reference only and not the finely condensed appreciation of 'Beauchamp's Career':

Distinct, peculiar, and lonely is the place in fiction held by Mr. George Meredith, the author of 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' 'Beauchamp's Career,' 'The Egoist,' and other novels. Mr. Meredith has been more than once described as a prose Browning. He has indeed much of Mr. Browning's obscurity of a style, not caused by any obscurity of thought, but rather by a certain perverse indifference on the part of the artist to the business of making his meaning as clear to others as it is to himself. He has a good deal of Mr. Browning's peculiar kind of grim Saturnine humour, not the humour that bubbles and sparkles—the humour that makes men laugh even while it sometimes draws tears to the eyes. He lacks the novelist's first charm, the power of telling a story well. But, despite these defects, he is unquestionably one of the most remarkable of all the modern novelists, short of the very greatest.

Mr. Herbert Paul has naturally a good deal to say of Meredith in 'The Apotheosis of the Novel under Queen Victoria,' contributed to the *Nineteenth Century*, May, 1897, but his generalisations rather than the detail of his criticism are here in point and as a contribution to the subject in hand I quote the following:



[From the drawing by Sir John Millais  
in "Once a Week"]

#### THE MEETING.

The girl for her babe made piteous speech,  
The youth for his love did pray,  
Each cast a wistful look on each,  
And either went their way

— George Meredith



Mr. George Meredith has long stood, as he deserves to stand, at the head of English fiction. . . . His style is not a classical one. But it suits Mr. Meredith, as Carlyle's and Browning's suited them, because it harmonises with his thought. Nobody says that Mr. Meredith's strong point was the simple and perspicuous narrative of events. He is not in the least like Wilkie Collins. He is not like anybody, except perhaps Peacock. But he is a great master of humour, of fancy, of sentiment, of imagination, of everything that makes life worth having. He plays upon human nature like an old fiddle. He knows the heart of a woman as he knows the mind of a man. His novels are romances, and not 'documents.' They are often fantastic, but never prosy. He does not see life exactly as the wayfaring man sees it. The 'realist' cannot understand that that is a qualification and not a disability. A novel is not a newspaper. 'Mr. Turner,' said the critical lady, 'I can never see anything in nature like your pictures.' 'Don't you wish you could, ma'am?' growled the great artist. Mr. Meredith has the insight of genius and of poetical genius. But he pays the reader the compliment of requiring his assistance. Some slight intellectual capacity and a willingness to use it are required for the appreciation of his books. They are worth the trouble.

'How much of Mr. Meredith will our children read?' asks Mr. W. L. Courtney in the *Fortnightly* of June, 1886, and proceeds thus to answer his own question :

Perhaps two or three novels at most—'Evan Harrington,' 'Richard Feverel,' and 'Diana of the Crossways.' Even these we can hardly imagine entering into their life, as 'Romola' and 'Adam Bede' have into ours. For towards Mr. Meredith we always must have a certain reserve; he does not come into the heart, we are still out of doors. Yet his is a powerful mind, full of philosophic culture. Some of his sayings will not leave us, even though the total impression be forgotten. This is just what might be expected in the case of a clever student of life, whose analytic power has been fostered at the expense of constructive art.

But if we wish to discover where enthusiasm would place Meredith, we have only to turn to Mr. Richard Le Gallienne, of all his critics the most constant in his admiration. Writing in the *Novel Review*, May, 1892, he says :

The fundamental element of great work is passion. It is that which vitalises all the rest—the creative passion, whether it be poetic or humorous or what, the gusto with which an artist first dreams, and then translates his dream into his chosen material.

This passion still heaves like a bosom in great books. A man

with a bounteous, enthusiastic temperament puts his life at its highest moments into them, and there it will go on beating so long as books exist—just as he himself had gone on had his body been but as durable a material as a book. . . . With this passion Mr. Meredith's books tringle from end to end.

The other fundamental quality of great work is what we call humanity. That is, man is presented in proper relationship to his environment, to the earth below and the heaven above; neither is forgotten, neither is exaggerated. No essential condition or characteristic is ignored.

Whatever subtleties of evolution may be the artist's theme, he must never forget that they have developed 'under the sun,' in the face of an infinite mystery, and from roots in earth. We must recognise the characters as beings, however different in developments from ourselves, as having the same origin, compounded of the same element, and as having the same destiny. We must be quite sure that they are flesh and blood, and not flesh and water. . . . Now Mr. Meredith's work fulfils this condition also. . . .

After passion and humanity, the common qualities of great work, of course, the other qualities depend on the individual. Whether his theme shall be the tragedy or comedy or mere beauty of existence, or all three, chances according to the gifts of the artist. The greater imitate life itself in combining all in their works, and certainly Mr. Meredith is of these. It is hard to say whether as a poet or a humorist he is most notable; indeed, it is unnecessary, for he is in no small degree both.

Mr. Meredith is indeed singularly complex.

He unites in a quite remarkable degree high powers as a poet, a humorist, a thinker, and a wit, all subserved, with the exception of five very small volumes of verse, to his work as a novelist. This complexity gives his novels their exceptional piquancy of appeal, for, as, perhaps, no other English novelist ever did, he sees a character or situation from every different point of view at once. His mind is, so to say, a prism which subdivides the primary aspect of such character and situation into all its subordinate aspects, though he is far too artistic not to respect the dominant impression. This, of course, is the true realism. Thus Mr. Meredith is always convincing.

It is clear from this where Mr. Le Gallienne would pinnacle his Meredith; the pedestal would be only a little lower than Shakespeare's, but lower, for he has said that he is one of those who 'could not love their Meredith so well loved they not Shakespeare more.' Mr. J. M. Barrie writes always, as we might expect, with a shade more reserve and yet we cannot suppose that his admiration for Meredith is a degree less warm than Mr. Le Gallienne's. The

conclusion of his study of the novels in the *Contemporary*, October, 1888, is noteworthy. There Mr. Barrie writes :

In this paper I have confined myself to Mr. Meredith's prose works, and I believe they will outlive his poetry. As to how many generations they will go down to, I shall make no predictions. Mr. Stevenson, with the audacity of a generous spirit chafing at the comparative neglect which has been the lot of his master, calls 'Rhoda Fleming' the 'strongest thing in English letters since Shakespeare died.' I shall only say that Mr. Meredith is one of the outstanding men of letters since the Elizabethan age, and that, without dethroning Scott, he is among the great English writers of fiction. We have a novelist of genius with us still. The others had their failings as he has, and, if the future will refuse to find room for so many works as he offers it, one may question whether it will accept theirs. To say that he is a wit is not to pronounce the last word. He is the greatest of the wits, because he is greater than his wit.

But if we want a finely-tempered judgment by way of counterpoise to Mr. Le Gallienne's—though I am by no means wishful to belittle the ardent appreciation of that most engaging writer, since one can admire enthusiasm even where differing from its opinions—one cannot do better than turn to Mr. W. C. Brownell, who sums up Meredith as follows in 'Victorian Prose Masters':

He stands quite apart from and unsupported by the literary fellowship which is a powerful agent in commending any writer to the attention of either the studious or the desultory. He cannot be placed. He has no derivation and no tendency. His works inhere in no larger category. He gains nothing from ancestry or association. He fills no *lacunæ*, supplements no incompleteness, supplants no predecessor. He is so wholly *sui generis* that neglect of him involves neglect of nothing else, implies no deficiency of taste, no literary limitedness. Failure to appreciate him is no impeachment of one's catholicity. If he has a philosophy he is too original to let it be perceived; if he has even a point of view he is too original to preserve it long enough for the reader to catch. The whole current of the literature of his day has flowed by him without apparently awakening any impulse on his part to stem or accelerate it, without even attracting from him more than the interested glance of the spectator. . . . He is too large a figure to be obscured even by his own 'originality,' on the one hand, or, on the other, to be belittled by the extravagant admiration of 'the elect.' He has written many novels and not one that does not furnish brilliant evidence of remarkable powers. His poetry is a secondary affair altogether, whatever its value, and it is as a novelist



that he ranks in the literature of his time. And as a novelist it may be claimed and must be conceded that his position is not only unique, as I have said, but of very notable evidence. What other writer deserves to rank with Thackeray and George Eliot in the foremost files of Victorian fiction?—I do not mean for extraordinary genius, like Dickens's, or for dramatic psychology, such as Mr. Hardy's, but for his 'criticism of life.'

The foregoing is criticism of the best kind, which faces the defects of a great master boldly and discovers his greatness in spite of the prickly hedges he has himself set about it. It has this advantage over the praise of the enthusiast, that, being based upon a deliberate and dispassionate investigation, it is less liable to the slings and arrows of the adverse and antipathetic. It is rock-built, less beautiful than the illuminated shrine of the devotee, but weather-proof. Mr. Brownell's judgment runs, on the whole, pretty evenly with that of his fellow-countryman, the late George Parsons Lathrop, but the latter was perhaps a step or two farther on the way to be a 'true blue Meredith man.'

The judgments of certain of the younger critics now fall to be recorded, and perhaps none is more strikingly conveyed than that of Mr. G. K. Chesterton, who writes as follows in his essay, 'Aspects of Meredith,' from which quotation has already been made :

Amidst and yet above this vast general drift towards mere differentiation, towards mere moods and manners, towards a sort of psychological Barnum show, stand two or three great men out of the age of the giants. They have all the interest of the moderns in the fascinating divisions, in the beautiful incongruities between man and man. But they still retain, out of a greater time, a greater memory. They remember this, that however deep, however wild, however baffling and bizarre be the difference between man and man, still it is a difference between man and man, not a difference between centaur and hobgoblin, between a mermaid and a hippogriff, between a kelpie and a dragon. Of these great men, the links between all that was good in the old philosophy of man and all that is good in the new study of men, the greatest is George Meredith. . . . Meredith stands alone in combining with his minutiae and insight that ancient sense of human fraternity which makes him like Scott and Dickens and Fielding, more a brother to his villains than the modern novelist can be to his hero.

Mr. James Douglas, one of the most brilliant of the younger

critics, with an unfortunate tendency to pursue a paradox careless of whither it will lure him, as may be noted in his study of Meredith in the *Morning Leader* on the occasion of the eightieth birthday, expresses in the following paragraph an opinion with which many critics concur :

The best in him comes out in his poetry, for there he breaks free from literary convention. 'Modern Love' is truer than many of his novels, for in those marvellous sonnets he faces the torture and torment of the human mind caught in the labyrinth of romance. But, like Disraeli, he is in his novels always on the side of the angels, and he seldom works out a situation to the bitter end. He has, like all the romancers, the cowardice of his convictions, and the convictions of his cowardice. He might have cut more deeply into the carcase of life if he had been writing in German or French or Russian or Norwegian, but he has never forgot the gaunt spectre of Philistian convention behind him, moderating and diluting and controlling his thought. He is, in spite of everything in him that makes for conformity, far in advance of his day, and he has a strong, resolute strain of dauntless Liberalism in his blood, which breaks out finely at intervals. His place as a novelist is not quite easy to fix. One feels that he is likely to become, like Browning, a bookshelf classic. But even that dusty immortality is not given to many mortals.

But in all the surge of criticism which burst upon us, flood-like, on February 12, 1908, I recall nothing that summarised with more point the distinguishing feature of Meredith, the tangible 'something' by which we can contrive to give him his 'place' in the great hierarchy of English letters, than a short letter, signed 'E. S. G.,' to the editor of the *Spectator*, in its issue of February 29. Who the writer may be I do not know, but his little note on 'Mr. Meredith's Modernism' distinctly calls for quotation here :

In your reference to Mr. Meredith's birthday (*Spectator*, February 15) you suggest one peculiarity in the work of our greatest living novelist which explains why recognition has come to him so tardily. 'His life spanned the whole Victorian age,' and yet he has never represented that age. In the nineteenth century he stood alone. His kindred will not be found in his great contemporaries—Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Tennyson—but in Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. He is their lineal descendant, and if we can find a parent for any work so distinctly original as his, we can find it in Fielding. Even his titles have an eighteenth-century ring—e. g. 'The Adventures of Harry Richmond,' 'Beauchamp's Career,'

'Lord Ormont and his Aminta.' His is not the actual eighteenth-century manner; it is an evolution of the eighteenth century, sublimated and impregnated with French charm and lightness. If the Fielding novel had continued on its own lines, and had not been diverted, partly through the influence of women writers, it would have evolved into something like the characteristic Meredithian novel—i. e. fictitious biography, chapters of a great *Comédie Humaine*. Yet Mr. Meredith has always been more 'modern' than the Victorians. He joins the eighteenth to the twentieth century as if there never had been a Victorian gap. From the date of his earliest novels he anticipated what we understand to-day by Modernism. The Victorian age was one of idealism and spirituality, of sentiment that at its best was exalted and noble, and at its worst was sentimentality. Heart was even more important than brain in the world of Dickens and George Eliot. There was a stronger sense of the seriousness than of the humour of life. Religion or religious philosophy was an important element. Mr. Meredith reacted against nearly every trait of his own times, and in reacting towards the past he produced a new type, a future, which has already become the present with us. The qualities he especially emphasises are strength with power, and, above all, brains. The head rules the heart; 'soul,' if such an obsolete term may pass, does not appear. The most distinctive feature of the style is polished, and yet genial, satire. Sentiment and emotion are drawn as weakness and follies; sentimentality is the cardinal sin. Instead of idealism he gives us almost scientific naturalism, and the love passion is frankly physical. Most of these traits are the common property of our twentieth-century writers. They, too, have reverted in many ways to the Fielding age, partly, no doubt, under Mr. Meredith's influence. Intensely modern he may be, but he has always been intensely un-Victorian.

I have kept for final quotation the judgment of a critic who might equally have been the first of our authorities, but whom I have designed to be the last because he is unexcelled among Meredith's critical exponents, the least prejudiced, the best admiring and the most unsparing. Thus Henley's words coming last will emphasise and underline much of what precedes them. Assuredly the true voice of criticism speaks in such a passage as this from 'Views and Reviews,' originally written for the *Athenæum*, November 1, 1879:

To read Mr. Meredith's novels with insight is to find them full of the rarest qualities in fiction. If their author has a great capacity for unsatisfactory writing, he has capacities not less great for writing that is satisfactory in the highest degree. He has the tragic

instinct and endowment, and he has the comic as well; he is an ardent student of character and life; he has wit of the swiftest, the most comprehensive, the most luminous, an humour that can be fantastic or ironical or human at his pleasure; he had passion and he has imagination; he has considered sex—the great subject, the leaven of imaginative art—with notable audacity and insight. He is as capable of handling a vice or an emotion as he is of managing an affectation. He can be trivial, or grotesque, or satirical, or splendid; and whether his *milieu* be romantic or actual, whether his personages be heroic or sordid, he goes about his task with the same assurance and intelligence. In his best work he takes rank with the world's novelists. He is a companion for Balzac and Richardson, an intimate for Fielding and Cervantes. His figures fall into their places beside the greatest of their kind. . . . In the world of man's creation his people are citizens to match the noblest; they are of the aristocracy of the imagination, the peers in their own right of the society of romance. And for all that, their state is mostly desolate and lonely and forlorn.

Henley, again, in the same month as he wrote the foregoing, gives us a generalised verdict on Meredith in his review of 'The Egoist' in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, November 3, 1879, where he says:

At its best, his work is of the first order; at its worst, it is brilliant, but tedious. One of the very few moderns who have the double gift of tragedy and comedy, he is one of the wittiest men of his generation and an original humorist to boot; he has a poet's imagination, and he is a quick observer; (he has studied human nature and human life and he is a master of his native tongue. But with all this he fails of acknowledged pre-eminence in his art. And the reason appears to be that he writes for himself alone. Extremely clever, he seems to prefer his cleverness to his genius. He is usually so bent on giving full play to his intellectual activity as to seem to ignore the novelist's main function, and to do his best to misuse the novelist's best gifts. He fatigues and bewilders where, if he so willed it, he could more easily attract and explain. You cannot see what he would do for the sparks he beats out in the doing. . . . It is no wonder that he should have been called 'a kind of Foppington-Fielding,' or that one should think of him as of a Molière who somehow prefers to be Marivaux. . . . Of course, it is a good thing to be the author of 'Rhoda Fleming,' and 'Beauchamp's Career,' of 'Richard Feverel' and 'Emilia,' for with all their faults those books are so many works of genius, and works of genius are not common. But it would have been a better thing so to have written them as to have made them intelligible to the world at large.

We have now examined a sufficient number of critical estimates to have gathered some general notion of where criticism would 'place' Meredith. While it may be thought at first glance that there is wide divergence of opinion—as when Oscar Wilde and Mr. Herbert Paul point out how he is in nowise a realist, whereas Mr. Le Gallienne is at pains to show how he is an example of the 'true realist'—there is really far more harmony than discord in these judgments of many minds.

We usually find the enthusiasm tempered, the admiration modified, by the recognition of certain grave faults which should not be present and cannot possibly inhere in the complete achievement of the highest. Henley and Mr. Brownell are the frankest in recognising these blemishes, and, despite the prejudiced opinion of the late York Powell, they are faults we do not find in George Eliot, who is in some ways Meredith's superior, though she falls behind him in the vivid creativeness of the imagination, and that splendid sense of power with which he confronts life as a whole.

It will be noted that his critics place him variously in the company of Balzac, Fielding, Scott, Browning, Dickens, and George Eliot—Mr. Chesterton alone drags in the feeble egoist Tolstoy—but this is seldom done with the idea that comparative criticism may be applied in his case, since most of them are agreed in the main that 'Meredith is Meredith.' It is rather an effort to express in a quick way some notion of his eminence in literature, not to suggest a likeness. He has done work which warrants the mention of his name with any of these, and he is, judged as a whole, utterly unlike each one of them. There is certainly no more likeness between him and Dickens than there is between Mont Blanc and the River Mississippi—both are great in different ways.

The resemblance to Browning—so much insisted upon, is no doubt more obvious, and yet at heart the two are strangers, for Browning is an essential Victorian and Meredith a 'modern,' in the sense so admirably explained above by 'E. S. G.'

His remoteness from his own age is due to his guiding star of comedy. He has written one of the finest tragic stories in the English language, and 'Rhoda Fleming' might well outlive most of his works, but comedy is the star to which he is ever true, and comedy was dead in the Victorian age, whereas it flourished in the Georgian, and has had re-birth in the twentieth century. Comedy can live only when men place themselves under the banner of Brain and determine to think rather than to feel, or at least to let their feelings be subject

to their reason. As Oscar Wilde very happily expresses it, Meredith's creations are not merely 'alive' in the sense that we feel Dickens's personages to be alive, sensuously that is to say, but 'they live in thought,' hence as a novelist he is 'interpretative and symbolic,' which is of the essence of comedy.

What is truly surprising in all these opinions we have examined is the lack of insistence on this aspect of Meredith. It is not enough to say that he is a great psychologist, that he is a philosophical novelist; he is the master mind of comedy using the modern novel as his vehicle instead of the stage. He has no fellowship with his younger contemporary, Mr. Thomas Hardy, who is a greater artist regarded purely from the point of view of the novel; that is to say, Mr. Hardy's novels are better, *quâ* novels, than Meredith's, but Meredith's are greater books, and only suffer by comparison when we test them by standards of conventions to which they were never intended to conform.

Whatever may be found lacking under microscopic criticism in Meredith's books, there is the continual sense of a fearless attitude to life, a great and noble spirit moving forward serenely to its destiny, amused the while with what it finds in humanity to interest itself. But whether this implies immortality for these books is a very different question. We may not be so unhopeful of Meredith's fate at the hands of posterity as Mr. Courtney is, and yet venture very seriously to doubt whether his fame will stereotype into a dusty convention such as Richardson's, or flourish, a fact of vigorous life, such as Fielding's or Smollett's or Sterne's is to the thinking book readers of our day. For Meredith with a following such as that of Scott or Thackeray or Dickens we simply cannot conceive.

What further strikes one in the opinions above quoted is the steady ignoring of Meredith the poet. Mr. Brownell flatly dismisses his poetry as a 'secondary affair,' and all the rest of the critics, without a word about it, seem to be of opinion that his place in literature will be fixed by his novels. Well, after all, it is somewhat idle to speculate, and posterity has a knack of thwarting the earlier generation in its cherished wishes. Meredith the poet may outlive Meredith the novelist, and, again, he may not; and then, again, it does not matter! He is to us now, and to all who come after us with the perception necessary to enjoy a rare and great mind, an incomparable writer of fiction, concerning whom to all who understand it is enough to say, 'Meredith is Meredith.'

This may be added finally, that while Meredith does not typify an epoch, his name will at least remain for all time a landmark of English letters, but it will not mark the era in which his life was chiefly lived and all his work achieved, so much as that succeeding it. In brief, this 'last of the great Victorians' is more likely to be regarded in time to come as first of the prophets of 'Modernism.'

## XVI

### THE CONTINENTAL VIEW OF MEREDITH

THERE is not, of course, a critical estimate of Meredith generally established on the Continent, radically distinct from the general estimate of him in England and America. French critics have, on the whole, shown most interest in his work, and indeed some of the studies which have appeared in the Paris reviews exceed in length and thoroughness anything ever printed in England or America on the same subject. But whether he is more widely read in France than in Germany is not an easy question to answer. Up to 1904 there were certainly more translations of his works in French than in German, but in that year a collected edition of the novels was begun in Berlin and is still in progress: an undertaking which France has not yet faced. It has to be remembered, however, that a larger proportion of Germans than of French read English, and as copies of many of his books in the familiar Tauchnitz edition have been in circulation on the Continent since 1875, when 'Richard Feverel' first appeared in two volumes, we may assume among German readers an acquaintance with Meredith at least equal to that of French readers, apart from the purely critical class. Doubtless more Germans than French have read him or wrestled with him in his native tongue. We must not too readily conclude that translations of his works in a certain language imply on the part of those native to that language a greater knowledge of the English writer than is the case with others into whose tongue no translations have been made. I do not know, for instance, of a Dutch translation of any of Meredith's works, yet the following letter was printed in the *Nation*, February 22, 1908:

SIR,—Mr. G. M. Trevelyan in saying about Mr. Meredith, 'But the world that so honours him is the English world alone,' overlooks my country. Here, in Holland, Meredith is very well known and much admired, of course, not by the public in general—neither is he, I feel sure, in England—but there is a large circle here where his books are read and highly appreciated. And this is not only



so in later years; for at least twenty years Meredith has been a familiar figure for our cultured people.—Yours, etc.,

A DUTCHMAN.

*Rotterdam, February 17, 1908.*

This would be news to many people, but what weight the letter may carry one cannot guess. The educated class of the Dutch, however, is noted for its linguistic attainments, and probably in no foreign country is there proportionately more English literature read by people of an alien tongue. Certainly Mr. Trevelyan was somewhat short of the mark in the phrase quoted by 'A Dutchman.' For, even when he was penning it, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* was printing one of the finest appreciations of Meredith ever written. Nothing so good as M. Firmin Roz's article was drawn from any English critic by the eightieth birthday celebrations. M. Roz remarks in a footnote to his first paragraph that 'the fame of George Meredith, established even here from his earliest days in literary and artistic circles, did not begin to spread until 1879, after the appearance of the "Egoist." ' Clearly Meredith was long ago 'honoured' by French critics, but if his novels have never run as *feuilletons* in the dailies of the boulevards, like those of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mr. H. G. Wells, that need not cause us surprise. 'The Egoist' would probably have been rejected by the fiction editor of the *Daily Mail*.

Before I proceed to examine the French criticisms, it may be worth while to set down in a brief paragraph a note of the translations which have appeared. First of all, was the greatly abridged translation of 'Sandra Belloni' by M. E. D. Forgues, which appeared in the three numbers of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* for November 15, December 1 and 15, 1864, and was later republished in 1866 by Hachette as part of M. Forgues's volume of English adaptations. In the same review and again in three different issues—those of April 15, May 1 and 15, 1865—and likewise by the same translator, an abridgement of 'Feverel' was printed as 'L'Epreuve de Richard Feverel.' The French version of 'The Egoist,' by Maurice Strauss, published in 1904, is, I gather from M. Roz, extremely unsatisfactory, but a translation of 'Diana of the Crossways' was in hand at the time of his writing; from which he seemed to expect better things. The 'Essay on Comedy' had also been obtainable in French since 1898, when M. Henry D. Davray's excellent translation was published separately by the *Mercure de France*, which review also printed in its second February

and both March issues of 1908, a translation of 'The Story of Chloe' by Marguerite Yersin. It will be seen from this that the amount of Meredith obtainable in French is small and unrepresentative, but there was never English author more difficult to convey into a foreign tongue with any approach to likeness.

Apart from the authorised German version of the novels, begun in Berlin in 1904, the only other German translation of which I have note is that of 'Harry Richmond,' published at Minden in 1904, in which year a Bohemian version of 'Feverel' was issued at Prague. In 1873 there was an Italian translation of 'Feverel,' published in a popular series at Milan. This is the entire tale of Meredith in foreign tongues and its poverty is no occasion for wonder, when we remember that so many of his countrymen find him addressing them in a speech so unusual that it seems as difficult to them as another language than their own.

Passing from bibliography to criticism, we find that the earliest notice of Meredith outside his own country occurs in a most competent study of 'Le Roman Anglais Contemporain' by M. E. D. Forgues in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 15, 1867. Oddly enough the writers whom M. Forgues brings into juxtaposition, on account of their having followed the tracks of Byron and Shelley in the enchanted land of Italy, are Trollope, Mrs. Browning, Mr. Alfred Austin and Meredith. Mr. Austin has published a novel, now long forgotten, entitled 'Won by a Head'—it sounds more like Hawley Smart than the staid and heavy laureate of our day—in which all the characters are brought together in Florence, and by virtue of this he rubs shoulders with Meredith for the only time in criticism, so far as I know. It is 'Vittoria' that M. Forgues is concerned with, and that novel had a special interest to him and the readers of the review, as the sequel to the story M. Forgues had in part translated less than three years earlier. The French critic is evidently somewhat exhausted after his bout with 'Vittoria,' and his judgment of the work would hardly whet the appetite of the readers of the *Deux Mondes*, though he says nothing that has not been said many times since by English critics, when he writes to this effect:

It would be a hard task to describe in detail the happenings of a life in which the troubles of the artiste, the jealousies of behind the scenes, the rivalries in love-affairs, are complicated with ceaseless journeyings, intrigues, abductions, fightings, spyings, duels; all moving swiftly, huddled together, confused and obscure enough to

baffle the quickest understanding, the most sustained interest. Imagination and wit are excellent gifts, so long as one does not misuse them. That is the conclusion to which one is inevitably led by the reading of this crowded work; where each chapter is a 'curtain'; where breathing space is lacking, so to say; where intelligence is accustomed to longing and to waiting; where the characters perform in a mist and seem as if they had become breathless and exhausted in their dizzying careers. Let us add, lest we be accused of injustice, that here and there is a glade, a vista if you prefer it, on the front of whose flowery confusion we catch a glimpse of the trail of the lion, sure signs of a power which, had it been but constant, would have become masterly.

Many years passed, so far as I can discover, before the name of Meredith engaged the readers of any French review again as a subject of criticism—thirty years almost! This one short note of M. Forgues was all that French criticism had to say for well nigh three decades, if we are to believe the most diligent of bibliographers; and yet the literary and artistic circles of Paris were familiar with Meredith 'from the earliest days' of his career! But when the French critics did engage themselves with the English novelist, it was to some purpose. Nothing could be more charming, for instance, than the way in which the late Marcel Schwob, who visited the novelist at Box Hill, presented Meredith to the French public in his rare and masterly 'Spicilège,' from which I have quoted at some length in an earlier chapter. He does not bear out M. Roz, when he begins by explaining the difficulty of his task at a time—1896—when Tolstoy and Ibsen were the vogue in Paris and thus easy to discuss, whereas of Meredith's works 'one knows nothing at all here.' He adds, perhaps excusingly, and none too correctly, that seven years earlier England was as ignorant of the novels. The reasons he gives for the long neglect are, of course, commonplaces of our criticism: the packed and over-weighted sentences, staggering with their loads of meaning, the involved psychology of the characters, implying too arduous a task from readers accustomed to the simpler emotions touched in the novels of Dickens and George Eliot.

M. Schwob then goes on to discuss how Meredith ever came to be accepted of the public, and gives the credit chiefly to Swinburne, Henley and Stevenson, for their 'repeated articles' in his praise. This, of course, applies only to Henley, of whom M. Roz has truly said that he 'contributed more than any one, not only to his success, but still more to the evolution of public opinion with regard to

Meredith.' But the power that was greater than Henley and all the friendly critics to make for ultimate success is thus described by M. Schwob :

Summing up, we may say that because of the importance of the questions which Meredith raises in his works, by the impassioned strength of his heroes—than whom the seventeenth century poets have produced no finer figures—by the haunting spell cast over us by his women : Rose Jocelyn, Lucy Desborough, Clara Middleton, 'Sweet creatures, with sweet names, the girls of George Meredith,' as Stevenson says of them; and above all because his *genius*, so far from diminishing in strength, has never ceased to grow during the space of more than thirty years, in which time he has produced about twelve long novels and four volumes of poetry, he must prevail in the end.

As the train was bearing M. Schwob toward Dorking, he began to think of a phrase which might sum up Meredith and his works, and he found it in 'More brain, O Lord, more brain!' The need of woman to rise to the height of her possible intellectual power and so, on equal terms, to understand man her mate, and man's need to understand nature, seemed to be the lesson of the sage he was about to meet, as it shaped itself vaguely in the Frenchman's mind while on his way to Box Hill. But perhaps the greatest compliment M. Schwob pays to Meredith is not to be found in this critical Kit-Kat, but in his dialogue on 'L'Amour' in which he names one of the characters 'Sir Willoughby.'

It was Mme. Alphonse Daudet who reintroduced the name of Meredith into French periodical criticism by giving a racy sketch of her two meetings with him at Box Hill and in London in the spring of 1895, in her 'Notes on London,' contributed to the *Revue de Paris* of January 1, 1896. In the chapter on 'Home Life' we have already read Madame Daudet's vivacious description of the novelist at home and in society. From the point of view of criticism her notes are of less importance, for no doubt the late Hannah Lynch was within the mark in supposing that Madame Daudet had never read 'The Egoist' or 'Diana' and never puzzled over a line of 'Modern Love.' Her effort at criticism is to this effect :

When we French knew nothing of him beyond his hymn to France in 1870 ('France, December 1870'), the generosity of that page, offered on the morrow of the disasters, should have aroused our admiration of him; but all his work is full of human observation expressed in the highest manner; his poems, his novels: 'The

Egoist,' 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel,' 'The Tragic Comedians. I have heard him compared to our Mallarmé for his artistic inspiration, the originality and independence of his mind.

Quite obviously the charming wife of Daudet is here writing of what she does not fully understand. She had not read Meredith at all, I fancy, and spoke at second-hand. Miss Lynch, who from her long residence in Paris might almost be described as a Continental writer, took Madame Daudet to task in the *Bookman*, in this style :

She informs her French readers that he is the Mallarmé of England. Could ignorance run to more absurd length? If you must hunt for Mr. Meredith's brother on French soil, he is there under your eyes as Stendhal. The same ruggedness and obscurity of style and meaning; the same bewildering originality; the same daring conception and delineation of woman; the same wit and brilliance of epigram and dialogue; the same large interpretation of life, of motive, of character. The defects, too, run parallel in their separate tongues: excessive subtlety, an affectation of utterance never surprised into simplicity and directness; an abhorrence of the conventional and commonplace ever on active guard, a tendency to abuse comedy and reduce the life of fashion to a fine art eliminated of all nature and passion and common experiences.

Of course Madame Daudet only observed that she had heard Meredith compared to Mallarmé, and when we find a critic such as M. Firmin Roz discovering even a momentary suggestion of likeness between Meredith and Mallarmé, Madame Daudet's ignorance may not be so atrocious! As to Stendhal, is it not just possible that Miss Lynch found in him the French Meredith not because of any extraordinary fellowship in art, but because of a literary career that somewhat resembled Meredith's? These literary likenesses are most unsatisfactory aids to criticism. Madame Daudet's notes on Meredith have no critical value, yet they indicate that early in the nineties, if not before, Meredith was a celebrity to literary France. Naturally when in 1900, M. Charles Legras, a French *littérateur* who has made a special study of English letters, and was for two years on the staff of the *Westminster Gazette* in London, came to write his admirable series 'Chez nos Contemporains d'Angleterre' for the *Journal des Débats*, he began with George Meredith. M. Legras writes with a nice appreciation of every aspect of the master's work and the poise of a true critic. Even when his criticism tends to run on conventional lines it remains interesting as the



[Picture drawn by Hallet K. Towne ('Pho')  
*en 'Onc. a Well*

### THE THREE MAIDENS

Said they to the youngest. Why walk you there so still?  
 The land is dark, the night is late  
 'O, but the heart in my side is ill,  
 And the nightingale will languish for its mate'

*George Meredith*



judgment of a foreign student who does not write at second-hand, but out of wide and deep knowledge of English literature :

It is suggestive of the French influence under which Mr. Meredith has worked that of all his characters he prefers Renée de Croisnel, one of the heroines of 'Beauchamp's Career.' 'If a Frenchman were to propose to her; tell me that he loved her,' he said to me laughing, 'I should immediately challenge him.' Here was a challenge which had a risk of being taken up.

M. Legras then goes on to mention Meredith's works in the order in which they appeared, saying that it was 'The Egoist' which in 1879 established his identity as distinct from that of 'Owen Meredith.' He touches upon the characteristics of the different books and considers 'Rhoda Fleming' the most dramatic, believing that it could be easily transferred to the stage. The types of character he finds essentially alive, but he observes that the author often requires an inordinate number of pages wherein to build up for us the creatures of his brain :

In order to show us his heroes mounting a horse or taking part in a quadrille, or even supping their soup and saying, 'How are you this morning?' we have to finish, whether we wish it or no, by living their life. When we add that at least fifteen days are necessary to a conscientious reading of 'The Egoist,' how shall we be able not to preserve in our mind the character of Sir Wiloughby Patterne? Certainly there are too many of these figures whom we remember in common with their comrades as possessing no striking originality and with whom we have been forced to spend much time.

Unfortunately after having praised the subjects of these romances, recognised the fidelity of the types, we shall find a style very unequal and a composition that is lamentable. At times we shall be dazzled by the admirable pictures of nature, as in the chapter of 'Richard Feverel' entitled 'A Diversion on a Penny Whistle.' . . . But alongside of these excellences how deep is the fall into affectation and obscurity! In the later works especially, the excess of finish has banished all simplicity: nearly every word is made to carry a metaphor, the images impinge upon each other and the grammar abounds in idioms.

M. Legras then undertakes a minute analysis of 'The Egoist,' remarking that the work is at once human in its passions and general sentiments, and essentially English in its setting, its manners, the society it describes :

Unfortunately the construction of the book is a challenge to our



good sense. Mr. Meredith does not understand the narrative art. As a rule he writes five pages when one would be sufficient. . . . In France there is an inclination to believe that this long-windedness and obscurity are common to the Anglo-Saxon genius; but this is somewhat of an error. Without doubt the novel among our English neighbours does not possess that brevity due to the judicious choice of details which is the glory of the great French romances: but we shall find a great difference of procedure between 'The Egoist' and 'Old Mortality' of Sir Walter Scott, 'The Woodlanders' of Thomas Hardy, 'The Jungle Book' of Rudyard Kipling. As regards the tendency to obscurity, there is one unfailing touchstone wherewith it may be tested: the theatre. A book that is obscure but may have other excellent qualities will possibly find many 'superior persons' ready to make it their gospel, but transport it to the stage and you will speedily learn whether it is in harmony with public taste. Mr. Meredith has once made this attempt, I believe, without, however, avowing his work, and the piece did not live. On the other hand, at the time of writing the three hundredth representation is taking place of 'The Second Mrs. Tanqueray,' a play that is clear and skilfully constructed.

To a Frenchman brought up in the faith of *une pièce bien faite* this opinion was inevitable. M. Legras's reference to Meredith's unavowed play I have been unable to confirm, and think it improbable.

To me (he continues) the wit of Mr. Meredith is as strange as his humour. Thus, in 'The Egoist' we are presented with much pomp to a certain Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, who possesses a wit so penetrating, so trenchant, so dazzling, 'that she could have ruled the county with an iron rod of caricature.' We see at once that she is going to pass on to young Willoughby one of these *mots* which stuck like an arrow between the shoulders of a man, and we find ourselves waiting for a remark such as that which she passed upon a certain prince of the best blood, 'A foot, a soul of a young lady;' or, if one wishes something more like caricature, one may recall the mordant epigram of Albert Millaud on Sarah Bernhardt when she was notably slim of figure: 'When she goes into her bath the water lowers.' Mrs. Mountstuart saw Sir Willoughby at a moment when the hero was engaging in a dance, the great lady opens her mouth, everybody pauses to receive her word, she speaks: 'You see, he has a leg!' Whereupon Mr. Meredith spreads himself out in twenty pages of admiration: he has sundry observations on the heart of Charles Stuart, on Buckingham and Rochester—I am left confounded.

To-day Mr. Meredith's work is finished, or at least he is likely to add but little to his great performance: one can therefore attempt

to pass upon him a more complete judgment than on any of his contemporaries. To sum him up in a simile: he resembles the Victory of Samothrace, that statue without a head, without feet, and in every sense incomplete, but of such magnificent parts that it seems to tower above the greatest.

I have deemed it wise to devote especial attention to M. Legras's study for its intrinsic value as well as for its being the first fully-considered criticism of Meredith printed in French. It dates back a mere matter of nine years, but since then the name of Meredith has been much in evidence in the French reviews, and his work is engaging the French critics so earnestly that it cannot be long before some effort is made across the Channel worthily to present the best of his writings in the most literary language of Europe. But even more significant than occasional set studies of the master are the incidental references one discovers from time to time in the writings of French critics indicating an intimacy with the works of Meredith. In the brilliant sketch of 'Foules Anglaises' which M. André Chevrillon wrote in the *Revue de Paris*, December 1, 1902, there is, for example, a passing touch on Meredith which leaves us in no doubt as to M. Chevrillon's being one of the many French authors who have come under the influence of the great Englishman. He writes:

It was not until about 1880 that the English, who had always looked upon us as eager pleasure-seekers, frivolous merry-makers, followers of La Fontaine and Béranger, learnt to speak about 'French pessimism.' We, on the other hand, have come to speak of English optimism. The greatest of the writers who have helped to mould the mind of the people since 1870, such as Robert Browning, Ruskin, George Meredith, have preached and sung in praise of the willingness to live, the hope it breathes in the heart, the beauty with which it engages the eye, and how through all the trials of life it is a sustaining power and a source of beauty.

Ruskin, the æsthetic, has said that the most beautiful of all colours is the carnation-flush of human cheeks, and George Meredith, who has no peer for insight among the English novelists, the child of Shakespeare, a profound poet, a rare and delicately-adjusted philosopher, has flushed the cheeks of his heroines with that living carnation: they are healthy young girls, from the bosom of Nature. These maidens charm by their refined and unerring power, their courage, their sure instincts, divinations swift as the flight of birds, by the unconscious growth, apart from the deep questions of sex, of their emotions, in which we discern their dawning ideas—by the blossoming forth, in short, of all the united forces of their beings in the splendid flowering of their love.

He has full faith in Nature. In her he recognises the source of all wisdom and beauty; he considers her worthy of our love which, so far from being satisfied with the flight of the low-circling swallow, yields itself to the magic of an ascent that ceases not, even in the heavens. He is in love with our wonderful life, its changings and upliftings, its beauty when unspoiled, its unconscious or meaningful unfoldings of leaf and tender shoot, little by little, until the human plant, in all its ripe perfection, is revealed. Then, penetrating psychologist that he is, he takes in at a glance from crest to root, with its spiritual flower, the continuous play of its slightest shades of mind, its scintillations of thought, its ephemeral fragrances, maintained by the most subtle and mysterious distillation of the unseen essences which it receives from the dull earth. He knows that even the best of us living on this earth, unknown to ourselves, have still to spiritualise ourselves at the fire of our willingness.

Mr. Meredith, who never preaches, and whose following grows stronger day by day, is at heart a moralist, and the one to warn us most often and most hard to please. We might call him the apostle of an idealistic naturalism. Like Browning and Ruskin, he believes that the soul will rise to more and more lofty heights from the splendours disclosed to the world. He sees what is divine in that which is earthly; and believes that we can help this divinity to free itself from our nature if our life is pure and wholesome, our character firm and true.

'The Egoist' is, of course, the work which has most exercised the minds of Continental critics, and if any one book were to be chosen as significant of what Meredith has had to tell the thinkers across the Channel it would be this. To the Continent he is the author of 'The Egoist.' The most elaborate and painstaking study of the work which exists is that of M. Emile Légouis, published in the *Revue Germanique* of July-August 1905. No English writer has ever attempted so exhaustive an examination of any modern masterpiece. The learning and the specialised knowledge of English life and history which M. Légouis has contrived to weave into this paper are remarkable. For thoroughness his method is more German than French, but the spirit of the whole is eminently French. It is a piece of serious criticism that does infinite honour to its subject, in its earnestness and sincerity, and equally to French contemporary letters. M. Légouis read his paper in the first instance before the Société des Amis de l'Université de Paris in January, 1905, and he did not feel inclined to apologise for the tardiness of France in taking up the study of Meredith in view of his own countrymen having so long neglected him. He sketched

the early life of the novelist, his travels on the Continent, and outlined something of his work in general before turning to the particular subject of his discourse. The novels he described as those of a man who had seen other peoples closely and deeply and, while full of the very pith of patriotism, had managed to look at his own country and his own people with the eyes of an outsider. He had come as a teacher at a time when England stood in need of such as he—the middle of the nineteenth century—when England was all ears to the doctrine of autophagy, or self-resource, which had been preached to her by Carlyle. That had been a doctrine of insularism, exclusiveness. Carlyle had adjured his countrymen to assert themselves, to be Germanic, to be Teutonic, to be Anglo-Saxon! But to be Anglo-Saxon, says M. Légouis, is to be doubly English; while this was certainly not all the counsel of Carlyle, it was at least the part of it most readily apprehended and observed. There were those who asked themselves what was the use of endeavouring to correct the insular haughtiness of the people, their disdain of the foreigner and their contempt for the finer issues of life doubly-dying their indigenous characteristics. Such remembered the culture of the south and what it had done and could still do to advance and clarify a national taste in the finer things of life. There was Matthew Arnold and his famous campaign against Philistinism, his holding up of Greece and France as examples, for the refining of the national character, against Carlyle's Anglo-Saxonism.

It was the time of increase in the followers of the æsthetic doctrine of Ruskin (says M. Légouis), whose aim was to cultivate the taste for the beautiful, whereas Carlyle had preached activity only; the pre-Raphaelites had withdrawn themselves from their own proper age, to look back across the years that had passed, seeking distractedly for delights of other days, deeming the people among whom they moved to be harsh and unsympathetic. It was the time that raised Swinburne, the *enfant terrible* of the group, to encourage the search after pleasure, Victor Hugo to show his pity for the poor, and raised to their highest the great Englishmen who had been Italianised by the Renaissance. It was, moreover, the period in which George Eliot gave a new depth to the ordinary novel, strengthened and enlivened moral philosophy by expending upon it a wider knowledge, and, without any of the narrowness of her countrymen, fixed her clear-sighted and kindly glance upon those who lived in other lands.

To this group of writers, informed with a wider or more refined

culture, Meredith is allied. One of the first things to strike one when perusing his novels after those of his predecessors, is the sharpened intellect, the absence of haughtiness and prejudice; he has the deep interest in all minds and peoples which is common to psychologists. He is diligent in learning to understand them, or rather—for his analyses have not the appearance of being laboured—he has insight into the mode of life, action, and thought of each race; again, he seeks to offer to his fellow-countrymen, not in the guise of strangers, as a feast of raillery, but as food for their intelligence, objects on which they may lavish their affections, too often spent entirely on themselves, a greater variety, reality and wider outlook on life. Anything that seems to him to betray a British limitation rouses him to vigorous rebellion. It makes him feel angry and ashamed to see his country detracted from or made foolish by means of conceit or stupidity. So he goes on railing at what he calls the 'singular attraction amongst English people for thick-headedness,' directing their taste towards the arts, all the arts, for which he himself has a consuming passion. His countrymen may have humour, but he wishes them also to have intelligence.

This is all extremely well considered and shows a just appreciation of the *rôle* which Meredith was designed for as one of the great teachers of the English people; but in 'The Egoist' particularly his lesson is as much for Europe and all mankind as it is for his countrymen. Of all his books none is so elemental, so universal, in its appeal; hence M. Légouis could not have any hesitation in choosing it for his exposition of the real Meredith. After a minute and searching analysis of the work from every point of view, the French critic formulates the following opinions as to its philosophy:

It were truly superfluous to tack a moral on to this study. One, or rather two morals stand out quite clearly, I think; one in respect to women, the other for men.

Meredith reminds men that since the far-off times when they lived in woods and caves, they have altered only in the garbing of their primitive nature. The egoist of to-day is the primitive man. His egoism has only become more cultured without disappearing; it has abated nothing of its first primal strength. And he warns us that if we once retard our forward movement by one step we immediately fall back to our very starting-point. It is with us as with the rower against the stream: relax our effort and we drift back—to our common origin with seed and plant.

To women, Meredith expresses his desire that they should have 'more brain,' for he scarcely need say that the best among them to-day are those who yet sacrifice themselves to the egoist as his natural prey. He does not consider (this is another of his bo

sayings) that clear-sightedness is unable to exist in harmony with true love. He sympathises with that feminist crusade which had already in 1879 passed its first infancy but had not yet attained the hardy growth we now observe in it. But on this subject he maintains a delicacy and caution which it is meet that we should consider. He who, among all the English novelists, has best known how to express in the most impassioned words, in the most glowing scenes, the emotions of love, young love that brightens and inflames, has not, even in that comedy of his, sacrificed love to the exigencies of his satirical mood, nor to the limits of a system. From the strength of true love his heroine Clara, the youthful rebel, borrows her power of resisting the advances of a false love. To the man who loves her in a true and noble manner she surrenders herself with the self-denial and renunciation that were—and doubtless will always be—the necessary signs by which she understands that she genuinely loves. Unbendable before Willoughby, before Vernon she is bendable, yielding, shy, abrupt and submissive. Vernon has for her that admiration which watches carefully and takes note.

What, then, according to Meredith, are the signs of the passion of love which he regards as genuine? First of all, a kind of humility common to the two lovers—the enraptured reflection of each in respect to the nature of the other, delight in seeing that nature unfold itself freely, fear of touching it lest it should be shaken or lessened, the feeling that one's own nature is of small account and that the nobler one is that which one contemplates. The true lover is he who loves the very soul of his adored one, who loves it in her and for her sake, who loves it distinct and sometimes wholly apart from her, as if by that means he could see her more perfectly as she is, and who delights in her variety.

It is fortunate that the background of the novel is lighted and warmed by the flame of genuine love, for the comedy which is acted in the front of the stage is sternly unmerciful, often with an undercurrent of pain in its laughter. The sharp instrument of the satirist pierces so fearlessly, so deeply that one wonders repeatedly if, in removing the diseased tissues, it does not affect the essential organs. It is a matter of doubt if there can be a name in any language which indicates a measurement slight enough to mark out the imperceptible distance which divides egoism from vitality. Does not a shiver run through one ceaselessly at the thought that the analyst is playing in his ironic fashion with the most intimate being of mankind: at the thought that the vice he so sternly condemns may be destroyed only by destroying life itself; for if it means life itself, it is curable only by death?

You have seen a spade dig deep into the earth around a sickly-looking stem at whose root the practised eye of the gardener has suspected there lives a never-dying worm. At each spade thrust one fears for the root as the iron comes so close to it. The smallest

space, a fraction of an inch or so, and the tree is doomed.- If the spade be handled by a La Rochefoucauld, we may be confident that the worm will not escape, but we may well tremble for the plant. The wonderful part of Meredith's philosophy and art is the fact that he knows so well, without cutting in any way the root, how to remove the hateful and formidable larva which has become encrusted there until it seems impossible to do anything without reckoning with it.

'La Femme dans L'Œuvre de Meredith' was the title of a remarkably well-informed article, also in the *Revue Germanique* (March-April 1906), from the pen of Mlle. Henriette Cordelet. This lady displays an extraordinary knowledge of women in English literature, from Shakespeare to Thomas Hardy, and her study ranks with the best criticism of Meredith, but it is an aspect of the novelist on which there is really nothing new to say; and in our chapter on 'His Heroines and Womenfolk' most that need be said has already found expression, so there is no call here to do more than mention the article of Mlle. Cordelet, who compares Meredith in 'The Egoist' to Molière in 'L'Ecole des Femmes.'

To the fine appreciation of Meredith with which M. Firmin Roz signalised the eightieth birthday celebration, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, of February, 1908, it would be difficult to devote undue attention; as a scholarly exposition of a foreign writer it ranks with M. Légouis's really great criticism of 'The Egoist,' showing every sign of a rich and scholarly mind and that splendid poise of judgment which seems native in all French men of letters, making of them the ideal critics. But M. Roz's essay occupies thirty-five pages of the *Deux Mondes*, which means that I can do no more than touch it in brief and sketchy outline. He begins by stating that no novelist is more open to misjudgment by reason of the very qualities which, once duly appreciated, are inherent in his greatness, and that a first essential to understanding Meredith is to forget all one has ever been accustomed to look for in fiction. He then goes on to contrast the non-conformity of English literature with the conformity of the French, and to point out that both have their virtues, though he naturally leans to that national taste and temper which go to the making of a consistent and equable literature. But Meredith is an arch-heretic, for he does not even conform to the commonest requirements of the medium he has chosen for his expression. Hence comparative criticism is useless as applied to him—though M. Roz is made to think of Mallarmé when he reads the prelude to 'The Egoist' and later does attempt comparisons.



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#### EVANS ENCOUNTER WITH TALLEY AND HENRY

Presently his horse's ears tickled at the animal's ear lowly. Evans' eyes fixed harder  
on the length of gray, leaning to the looser, his rears were seen no more. Out from the  
mouth grass of the last a couple of horses issued and came straight to the gates  
—Iv n Hurr agton Chapter XIV





There is arduous work before any one who essays to follow Meredith through the tangles and torrents of his stories! The individualism of our country, so strongly marked in the marriage relationship, so established in the home—an institution which M. Roz deems needful of explanation to French readers—and so characteristic of the national spirit, is *in excelsis* in Meredith. It is here the critic strikes the note that keys his whole study. As to the English devotion to 'character,' which finds expression in Meredith, he remarks:

There is a kind of wisdom which is above common sense and natural instincts: it is the quick perception of a strong, calm mind, the steadfastness of an upright will; it is 'character.' Mr. Meredith's noblest heroes, his favourite heroes, those who give to his books their most lasting impressions, as they would in real life, are strong characters: Merthyr Powys, Vernon Whitford, Redworth. We cannot help comparing them with those who have the whole-hearted sympathy of Thomas Hardy: Gabriel Oak, Winterborn, Diggory Venn. Tried in friendship, faithful in love, calm in their attitude towards life, they are strong and healthy specimens of Englishmen, active in body and mind, 'the typical Saxon,' as Diana calls one of them. Mr. Thomas Hardy has taken his models from the lowly country folk, Mr. Meredith from society people. The former are blunt, the latter more subtle; but the fundamental element is the same, and the refinement of sentiment belongs no less to the one group than to the other. This is because they are both brave enough to face life openly and to consider it in other ways than as merely ministering to their wishes, pleasures and whims. They see life as it really is; understand it and accept it. They are neither egoists nor creatures of passion. Their disinterestedness leads them to love; true love which gives up and forgets its own aspirations, surrenders everything, expects nothing, and triumphs in the end. Vernon marries Clara, Redworth weds Diana, and we have a presentiment and an earnest hope that some day Sandra will become the wife of Merthyr Powys.

In short, the whole 'philosophy' of life which we can gather from Mr. Meredith's novels is an essentially English vindication of character, prolonged and thoroughly examined. The heroes such as Merthyr, Redworth and Vernon are such as are in fullest accord with the facts of life, and that is why in the end they come out nobly from the great trial, 'ordeal,' in which Richard Feverel shows himself a failure.

In further consideration of Meredith's philosophy, M. Roz takes Mr. Trevelyan's phrase 'the prophet of sanity' for his text and approvingly expounds it thus:

He has brought to men some old truths shaped in a rejuvenated gospel that makes them seem to be but newly conceived. And in fact they are new, since they face the light in a new age, and one were at a loss how to distinguish them, except by the most artificial of abstractions, from the radiant intelligence which, in truth, does not merely accompany them, but inheres in them, and impresses them upon us. It is only by means of that illumination that we see clearly for the first time the things which have always been before our eyes without attracting our attention; it is by means of it that we at last understand, that we know. . . . So we must not rely upon finding very original ideas in Mr. Meredith's works: nor, indeed, is that the function of a novelist. Let us watch the movements of his characters, let us listen to their discourse. Behind the outward show on which we too often glance in a careless, indifferent and wearied fashion, there lurks an unknown meaning which will suddenly appear when the artist's hand draws aside the curtain. Genius does not invent: it simply points its finger at the very heart of things, and makes us tremble before the truths unveiled. Not that the truths are new, but that our comprehension of them is; it is on the mind of the beholder that they exert their influence, and in his mind are they created.

Mr. Meredith's novels seem to conjure up in our minds a vision of the world as it really exists, of life regarded as a concrete fact, with its necessary elements, and its true basis, of man and woman regarded in their proper relationship, in their real nature. All this, of course, not theoretically, arbitrarily, but seen by the simple light of observation, the results of experience, by the mere reflections of a courageous sincerity. Life is not regarded as an interesting system, but on the contrary it first of all impresses truths on the mind gathered by observation and these in turn react upon it, lighting up its secret recesses. Every exaggeration confutes itself by the disappointment which it involves, by the contradictions to which it gives rise, by its attendant consequences. To the man who looks upon life simply, frankly, there is no immoderation which does not reveal itself as such in the facts. The upright life stands between two opposing extremes. 'Our civilisation is founded in common sense. It is the first condition of sanity to believe it.'

Into the detail of M. Roz's most searching, but always appreciative criticism, one cannot here attempt to go, but this note as to the 'battle of the sexes,' of which Mlle. Cordelet has written so well in her study above mentioned, may be quoted:

The 'circumstances' of Mr. Meredith's novels are nearly always the same. When he makes his characters face great questions in 'Beauchamp's Career,' it is the radicalism of the English people; 'The Tragic Comedians,' it is socialism; in 'Vittoria,' the

revolutionary spirit; in 'Diana of the Crossways,' the social independence of women—he always and everywhere shows that they involve the battle of the sexes, in which prudence and happiness are the stakes. Man, indeed, never exposes himself more openly than in his opinions and attitude towards women. Take Willoughby as an example: his egoism never expands wholly, never unrolls all its folds and shows all its secrets until it is undergoing the test of love. Love is the great test of Richard Feverel. 'Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man,' he writes in 'The Egoist,' 'or they shoot us higher than the topmost star. But it is as we please. Let them tell us what we are to them: for us they are our back and front of life: the poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice; ours is the choice . . . they are to us what we hold of best or worst within.'

As we choose: we are the artificers of their fate, so we are answerable for their degradation or their ennobling. Mr. Meredith wars on behalf of woman, but not for mere feminism. Although he may believe she ought to have her own rights, a mind, a soul, he is as far as possible from believing it would be an ideal thing for her to have the independence of isolated individuality. In his eyes, the fullest life exists only in union, in love. Woman brings into love that spontaneity which is seen in the poet, that beauty which compels us to cherish her as the purest mirror of beauty of the world, that spirituality which her less material and more subtle nature is able to maintain, so long as she is not turned aside from her natural destiny. Diana Warwick, Sandra Belloni, Clara Middleton, that is what you bring to those who are worthy of you, to those whom the test has shown to be the strongest and best, truly manly, in a word, men of character. These are they to whom is given the victory, and they alone are capable of achieving happiness since they alone live in the full sense of life.

Finally we have in the following M. Roz's own summing up of the great writer whose personality has within recent years awakened among the intellectuals of France an interest so deep and sincere that in the near future the influence of Meredith on French writers of the new generation cannot fail to be considerable:

He affects brevity when his wish is to gather himself together for a forward leap; a brevity that sharpens and betimes blunts the reader's perception; a briskness that engages us without affording any peace, and an energy that knows no repose. These qualities are all most effective in novels whose aim is not to amuse lazy minds nor to pamper idle fancies, but to rouse intelligent understandings and imprint upon them a clear and lasting impression of human life, its tragedies and comedies, its need of sympathy and its provocation to laughter. Gifted with so wide a sense of reality

equally capable of either irony or pathos, Mr. Meredith raises *sa figure d'aisée et superbe prépondérance* above all living English novelists. But in spite of all his disconcerting qualities, he does not exist among them in isolation. The tradition of the English novel is so strong that even the most independent or rebellious novelist never quite escapes it, and it would be interesting to follow its influence upon George Meredith. . . . He is not without qualities analogous with those of his great contemporaries; he is like Dickens in his wealth of detail, his humour and his feeling for caricature; like Thackeray in the delicacy and subtlety of his portrayal of womenkind, and in his irony; like George Eliot in the seriousness of the questions which he propounds and his deep knowledge of life. . . . There is no question as to the difficulty of his novels: they must be studied rather than read. But what a rich reward does the diligent reader reap from the subtle artist and close observer of life! What a lesson we should derive from him, we whose novels, if they have none of the blemishes which are the exact reverse of Mr. Meredith's good qualities, have too often a need of the good qualities which are the reverse of his blemishes! Let the mind but cleave its way through these thickets and accustom itself to the variations of light and shade in these enchanted woods: it will soon yield to their enchantment. Thus it is that we admire Meredith, and when we consider that he is also—some say, above all—a poet, and the author of 'Modern Love,' we would say that, even though his novels in their essentially human and English characteristics are too bedecked with personal fripperies to be universally recognised and loved as real masterpieces, they are yet very great novels, whose author discloses himself as a personality of the most remarkable kind; unquestionably the greatest man of letters in England at the present time, even in the eyes of those who hesitate or who refuse to own that he is England's greatest novelist.

In the *Mercure de France* of March 1, 1908, M. Henri D. Davray, who had already written so discerningly of Meredith's poetry in *Literature*, the short-lived weekly review issued by the *Times*, devoted his always scholarly article on 'Lettres Anglaises' to a review of Meredith's life and work, while a month later, in another Continental review, M. Stanislas Rzeuski published a long appreciation, declaring that 'Meredith is undoubtedly the most universally esteemed representative of English contemporary literature.' And shortly after the death of the novelist, M. L. Simons, the director of the Dutch Universal Library, Amsterdam, wrote an interesting letter to the *Westminster Gazette*, in which he stated that he had first been attracted to Meredith on the publication of 'The Amazing Marriage,' a reading of which induced him at once to secure a complete set of the

author's works. He ended by reading all, and most of them twice. He then wrote a study of Meredith for the benefit of his fellow countrymen. 'It took me,' he says, 'with my other work, little less than eighteen months to do this; but I have no recollection of my having spent another eighteen months in my life so full of intellectual, imaginative and literary enjoyment.'

From these somewhat sketchy notes, in which I have observed sequence of date rather than relativeness of criticism, it will be seen that in France at least there is a very intelligent and steadily widening appreciation of Meredith's art and philosophy. No such evidence of critical interest has come under my notice from Germany; but I am less familiar with German criticism and may have missed what others are acquainted with; though I do not think anything approaching in extent or importance to the French criticism I have quoted has yet appeared in Germany. [I have since been told that to the *Deutsche Rundschau*, in 1904-5, Dr. Sotteck contributed a fine appreciation of the novelist.] The German edition<sup>1</sup> of the novels is, however, something that France has to emulate; but I am persuaded that Meredith will never have finer interpreters than M. Légouis, Mlle. Cordelet, M. Roz, M. Davray, or indeed any of the French writers to whom in the foregoing pages I have had to draw attention. Certainly Mr. Trevelyan was less than just to France—whatever he may have been to Holland!—when he declared that it was the English world alone that honoured Meredith.

It should be noted that at the time when the first edition of the present work was in the press many articles appeared in the Continental journals and reviews—so many, indeed, that a survey of them would take this chapter beyond all bounds—called forth by the passing of the great poet-novelist. Of these none excelled in interest or beauty the tributes of M. Henri Davray in the *Mercure de France* and in the *Figaro*. But the 'Continental view' is, after all, the home view, for none of the foreign critics we have read differs vitally from English criticism, though they have all some fresh touch that adds to the completeness of our view of a great Englishman whose reputation has become European.

<sup>1</sup> A German friend informs me that Miss Ida L. Benecke's translation of 'The Tragic Comedians,' published soon after Meredith's death, is admirably done. Miss Benecke, I understand, actually made her translation of the novel no less than twenty-seven years before the author's death.

## XVII

### ILLUSTRATORS OF THE POEMS AND NOVELS

To all but collectors and connoisseurs it may be something of a surprise to know that the illustrators of Meredith are worthy of notice. Yet the illustrations of his poems and his novels, if collected, would make a large and interesting portfolio. The most important of them are also the least familiar; they take us back to that golden age of English wood-engraving in the early 'sixties,' when Millais, Holman Hunt, Sandys, Tenniel, Keene, and 'Phiz' were drawing their little pencil pictures for *Once a Week*, and the books of the period, now eagerly and wisely sought after by collectors. In the present work some of the most noteworthy of these engravings have been carefully reproduced, but the subject as a whole is of sufficient bibliographic importance to warrant more than can be conveyed in the 'legends' of the cuts.

There are several remarkable facts associated with the *débuts* of Meredith and his long survival. It was noted, for instance, that Mr. W. M. Rossetti, who reviewed 'Poems' of 1851 on the first appearance of the volume, was alive to congratulate the author, fifty-seven years later, on the attainment of his eightieth birthday, and now survives him. It may also be mentioned as an interesting fact that the first artist to illustrate anything written by Meredith was Sir John Tenniel, who made the admirable drawing of Sir Gawain and his bride that accompanied 'The Song of Courtesy,' the first contribution from the poet to *Once a Week*, dated July 9, 1859. Almost half a century later, Sir John was alive to sign the address presented to Meredith on February 12, 1908, though, oddly enough, his name was not among the signatures. This was Tenniel's only illustration to Meredith's words, and it is thoroughly characteristic of the artist's manner, which in his earlier career, as in his prime, was marked by a free line and a supple grace of figure that in later years tended to harden into certain rigid conventions.

The next poem in *Once a Week* was printed just three weeks

later, and Hablot K. Browne supplied the cut, which is not a success, and is quite unlike the familiar Frenchified style of 'Phiz.' Here and there it is out of drawing; the expressionless features of the women, the looseness of the grouping and the general feeling of emptiness, hardly make it a worthy pictorial interpretation of 'The Three Maidens,' but I reproduce it none the less, as it is not without interest to-day. To 'Phiz' was also allotted the illustrating of Meredith's next two poems, 'Over the Hills' (August 20, 1859), and 'Juggling Jerry' (September 3, 1859), in the same periodical. Here we find the illustrator more happily inspired. There is spirit and movement and a touch of atmosphere in the vignette to the first-named poem, while the simple pathos of Juggling Jerry's end is at least suggested with some imagination in the second woodcut. 'Phiz' was also the illustrator of 'A Story-telling Party,' signed 'T,' in *Once a Week*, December 24, 1859, which Sir Francis Burnand has told us was written by Meredith, to whom Burnand had related some of the stories; but though much more in the vein of the artist as we know him in his illustrations to Dickens, I have not reproduced either of the comic illustrations which accompany that merry fiction.

Most noteworthy of all these *Once a Week* woodcuts are the three next in succession, the work of Sir John Millais. 'The Crown of Love' (December 31, 1859) gave the artist good scope for a drawing informed with passion and poetic feeling, which, in a beautifully balanced composition, he has expressed to perfection. But 'The Head of Bran' (February 4, 1860) was an even better opportunity for the pencil of a master, and here we have a picture of real distinction, entirely worthy of its subject. There is less that is characteristic in Millais's woodcut to 'The Meeting' (September 1, 1860), but there is a quiet beauty and a homely touch in it that suits the subject admirably.

Of the other two illustrated poems in the same periodical, 'The Patriot Engineer' (December 14, 1861) has a typical illustration by Charles Keene, every touch of character being closely observed and portrayed with the precision we always expect and never miss in the work of that great genius in black and white. The decorative detail and studied beauty of line and composition of the pre-Raphaelite school find an excellent example in the masterly drawing by F. A. Sandys, with which 'The Old Chartist' was adorned in the issue of February 2, 1862.

Were these the sum total of the illustrations to Meredith, they



would still be quite a noteworthy group; but while they are in many ways the most interesting, and contain at least three of the gems of the whole collection, their removal from the portfolio would have no appreciable effect on its bulk.

In going through the illustrations to 'Evan Harrington' to-day one feels that it was on the whole a happy chance when the editor of *Once a Week* gave the story to Charles Keene to illustrate. Of all the author's novels this is the only one in which Keene could possibly have felt at home. It moves at times along the same paths of character which the artist was wont himself to pursue, and if at times it rises into the rarer atmosphere of high comedy, demanding of the artist a conception of beauty rather than character, Keene does not altogether fail even then. Here I have chosen from the forty-one illustrations a selection, which is at once typical of the whole series and of intrinsic artistic interest.

There is quiet dignity and strength in the picture of the Great Mel on his deathbed, with Mrs. Mel and Lady Rosely standing by. In every sense this is a model of story illustration, the detail being carefully studied, and yet the result is an admirably balanced composition. But of course we have Keene in his element when he is showing us old Tom Cogglesby's arrival at Beckley Court in his donkey-cart, and perhaps best of all in his drawing of the two quaint brothers over their Madeira at the Aurora. The languorous, affected manner of the Countess de Saldar he suggests very cleverly in his cut for Chapter XIX of the novel, but perhaps he makes that remarkable woman a thought too fleshy. He was always less successful with women than with men, and any student of his work in *Punch* will remark how seldom he introduced women into his drawings. We do not feel, for instance, that the beauty of Rose Jocelyn is realised in either of the illustrations I reproduce, but Evan Harrington is conceived on the lines of the author in both, as again in the very striking picture of him on horseback awaiting the onset of Laxley and Harry. The vignette of Evan's meeting with Susan Wheedle I have also thought worthy of reproduction, for though it lacks definition in the lower part, and the hands of the girl are out of drawing very badly, it has a fine sense of vigour and dramatic colour.

On the whole, Keene's illustrations are not an impertinence to the novelist, as so many illustrations of fiction are to-day. Where they lose somewhat as pictures is in a too conscientious effort to



I I s of M s I  
A I o I

I I th I n I I o I n  
I n e I r H I

# THE SONG OF COURTESY

Lk th tr l n l t r y we  
Mak t l t t l u b  
Bautiful ver ly C it y



stick to the text, but it is a fault that, save where he falls short of feminine grace, is to be accounted a virtue in an illustrator. None of these woodcuts have ever been printed in volume form, I think, and Mr. Bernard Partridge supplied the frontispiece to the story in the 'New Popular Edition.'

If we could have had a combination of Keene and Du Maurier to illustrate 'Evan Harrington' the result would have been as nearly perfect as it would be possible to attain; the one giving character, the other grace and that 'polite' touch which was foreign to Keene's work. But George Du Maurier—Meredith's most important illustrators, it will be noted, were both *Punch* men—did the illustrations for 'Harry Richmond' when the story appeared in *Cornhill*, and these charming drawings translate us at once into the realm of high comedy. By permission of Messrs. Smith Elder and Co., I am able to give a selection of Du Maurier's drawings.

The picture of Roy carrying his son Harry in his arms away from Riversley through the 'soft mild night,' that had witnessed the great storm between Squire Beltham and his son-in-law, is finely studied, and if that of Harry and Temple meeting the Princess Ottilia is on more conventional lines it is still instinct with grace and movement. Then, do we not see the very man, the splendid figure of romance, in the illustration of Richmond Roy, smoking his cigar and flipping idly the strings of his guitar, as he chats with Harry and Temple in 'High Germany'? And again, years later, when he re-introduces his son to Ottilia at Ostend? Then the picture of Ottilia, 'like a statue of Twilight,' makes one wish the same artist had given us his conception of the Countess de Saldar. The interest of the other drawings I have chosen centres in Richmond Roy—the figure of this great character having fascinated the artist as thoroughly as it does every reader of the book—and we see him in his strength and power at his meeting with Squire Beltham on the eve of his 'grand parade,' confounded when the squire 'has his last innings' and the grand parade is over, and towards his sunset when Harry returns to find Janet Ilchester the stay of his sinking father.

In the 'New Popular Edition' Mr. William Hyde has drawn a frontispiece for 'Harry Richmond' which is totally unlike anything of Du Maurier's. Instead of high comedy, which is always the note of Du Maurier, Mr. Hyde has given us a dramatic and masterly picture of Riversley on the great night when Roy came hammering at the door; the lighted windows, the stormy sky, and

full moon, are all suggestive of the tragic, but the picture is wholly admirable. A few notes on the other illustrators of the edition may here be added. Mr. C. O. Murray imparts a fine old-fashioned touch to his picture of 'The Magnetic Age' for 'Richard Feverel,' which was drawn in 1878; there is but little character in the frontispiece to 'The Egoist' by Mr. John C. Wallis, and Mr. Leslie Brooke's rather feeble line drawing of Robert and Aminta at the death-bed of Mrs. Armstrong is no great adornment to 'Lord Ormont and his Aminta,' while Mr. Sauber's plate to 'The Tale of Chloe' is distinctly conventional, illustrating the lines:

'Fear not, pretty maiden,' he said, with a smile;  
'And pray let me help you in crossing the stile.'  
She bobbed him a courtesy so lovely and smart,  
It shot like an arrow and fixed in his heart.

Unique among the illustrations of Meredith's poetry is the edition of 'Jump-to-Glory Jane' produced by the late Harry Quilter in 1892. This contains 'forty-four designs invented, drawn and written by Lawrence Housman.' The mis-spelling of Mr. Housman's name, which is printed in bold type on the title page and occurs again in the text, cannot have been a printer's error; but whether Mr. Laurence Housman used to spell his name with a 'w' I cannot say. That is a minor point. Here the pictures are the thing, rather than the poem or the critical notes wherewith the editor prefaced the little work.

The poem itself was first published in the *Universal Review*, in 1889, and the editor would seem to have endeavoured in vain to get an artist to illustrate it suitably there, but having determined that it was capable of imaginative treatment in black and white he carried out his idea a year or two later by entrusting Mr. Housman, then a young and promising artist, with the work. He had suggested Mr. Linley Sambourne to Meredith in 1889, as the right man to do the drawings, and the poet replied: 'Sambourne is excellent for *Punch*, he might hit the mean. Whoever does it should be warned against giving burlesque outlines.' For some reason or other Mr. Sambourne could not undertake it and Mr. Bernard Partridge was next applied to, but 'his heart failed him'—he was surely the last man to do the drawings, so that his heart did not misguide him!—and consequently the poem first appeared without illustrations. Later when Mr. Housman undertook the commission, the artist, whose imaginative touch is seen in all his

line work, as it has later found expression in both prose and verse, complete the series.

Here was the man for the work: he had just that restrained notion of the comic which blends into the weird, the imaginative, the mystic, the spiritual, and is so rare among artists. Mr. Sam-bourne would certainly not have made a success of the drawings, had he been so misguided as to undertake them. Mr. Housman did, so far as success was attainable.

Quilter very frankly criticises the drawings. 'They are not perfect by any means,' he says, 'and in many points open to serious criticism, but the root of the matter is in them—they have the rare qualities of imagination and sympathy, and from the technical point of view, they show that this artist has only to work to become an admirable designer.' They fail only in certain details of pen-work, it seems to me, indicating no weakness of the artist, but an in-acquaintance with the limitations of process engraving, then less advanced than it is to-day, and the technique of which he speedily mastered.

As imaginative pictorial presentments of the poem they are wholly admirable. The 'wistful eyes, in a touching but bony face,' and the whole gaunt, pathetic figure of Jane are successfully realised. The subtle suggestion of the stained-glass saint in the jumping figure of Jane, as in the plate, showing the prophetess appearing before her first convert, 'Winny Earnes, a kind of woman not to dance inclined,' has a firmness and confidence of line which would have strengthened some of the other designs, while that illustrating the verse 'Those flies of boys disturbed them sore,' has a quaint touch of friendly humour in the figure of Daddy Green, in whom the boys seem chiefly interested.

Mr. Housman's drawings are certainly among the most interesting of all the Meredith illustrations, and one cannot but think that they must have had the approval of the poet himself, as they fully conform to the lines he had laid down for the illustrating of the poem, being charged with quiet but sympathetic satire of the religious mania he sought to expose, and never remotely leaning to burlesque: indeed, there is pity in them, as in the poem, and pity, as a rule, is no friend of satire.

To Mr. William Hyde are due some of the finest of recent illustrations to Meredith, and these entirely of nature scenes. Mr. Hyde's work is of a rare quality in nature-feeling and repose, with

just that touch of indefiniteness that leaves us still with a little of the mystery to colour our vision of the scene, so that no better illustrator of Meredith's poems could be imagined. The collection of 'Nature Poems of George Meredith,' published in 1898, with twenty full-page pictures in photogravure and an etched frontispiece by Mr. Hyde, is a real artistic treasure. For the two volumes of poems in the edition of 1898, Mr. Hyde drew the Châlet and Flint Cottage, and London Bridge as the frontispiece to 'One of Our Conquerors.' The view of Oxshott Woods which adorns 'Sandra Belloni' is also, I suspect, by Mr. Hyde, and he too may have drawn 'Off the Needles' which accompanies 'Beauchamp's Career,' but if so it is not quite in his usual style. There is a pretty wash drawing of Queen Anne's Farm to 'Rhoda Fleming' and 'The Old Weir,' finely suggestive of the romantic quietude of the scene, to 'Richard Feverel,' both by Mr. Harrison Miller, while Mr. Maxse Meredith contributes a dainty little line drawing of 'Crossways Farm' to 'Diana,' and there is a fine sunny wash of La Scala by Mr. Edward Thornton as frontispiece to 'Vittoria.' For 'The Amazing Marriage' a photographic view of a scene in Carinthia is thought sufficient, and a dignified, virile bust of Lassalle, evidently of German origin, is given as frontispiece to 'The Tragic Comedians.' One of the earliest and best of all the illustrations to Meredith is included in the 'New Popular Edition.' This is F. Sandys's well-known picture of 'Bhanavar among the Serpents of Lake Karatis,' a fine decorative work which was first engraved on steel for the 1865 edition of 'Shagpat' and the original of which in oils was exhibited at the Royal Academy show of English painters some years ago.

In the autumn of 1908 a most noteworthy addition was made to the gallery of Meredith illustrations in the shape of Mr. Herbert Bedford's fine series of miniature portraits of 'Meredith Heroines,' exhibited at the Doré Gallery from October 23 to November 18. Mr. Bedford takes eminent rank among the illustrators of Meredith by virtue of these exquisite little paintings on ivory. For many years the thoughts of this well-known miniaturist had been so engaged with Meredith's womenfolk that he set himself the delightful task of searching out fair sitters who already possessed many of the physical charms of the heroines, determined to interpret in a series of beautiful ivories the Meredithian women who had most captured his fancy. His paintings are thus idealised portraits of actual ladies who, more or less, 'fill the bill' of the novelist in the



# OVER THE HILLS

It's not a little under the sun and  
 An' I shall be the bracken spray  
 What joy on the heather to follow  
 Over the hills and away

T. W. H.





matter of good looks, and few who saw Mr. Bedford's exhibition will deny the genuine feeling for character which he displays in his interpretation of these famous figures of the novelist's imagination.

In all, fifteen subjects have been exhibited by the artist, and where the quality of all is so even it is not easy to indicate preferences. His Lucy is certainly worthy of Ripton Thompson's 'She's an angel!' and Mrs. Mount is admirably caught, in a way to justify her creator's declamation that 'she could read men with one quiver of her half-closed eyelashes.' If anything, I prefer Keene's Louisa, Countess de Saldar—although Keene so often failed in depicting women—to Mr. Bedford's. There is, of course, no real comparison of the two pictures; Keene's easy, confident pencil lines against Mr. Bedford's meticulous brush and colours. But I feel that Mr. Bedford's is too charming a face—it is a little gem of painting, the black of the Portuguese head-dress against the delicate flesh tints being perfectly contrived—too charming for that lady, whose affectation of indolence is so happily suggested by Keene. On the other hand, Mr. Bedford's Rose Jocelyn is as successful as Keene's is stodgy and ungraceful, while his Caroline makes one almost willing to agree with George Uploft, when he said of her, 'The handsomest gal, I think, I ever saw!'

From 'The Egoist' Mr. Bedford has taken, of course, Clara and Lætitia, and he is more successful, I fancy, with the latter, more to the book, that is to say, giving us some real hint of the character, for which he has chosen the words of Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, 'Here she comes with a romantic tale on her eyelashes.' This Mr. Bedford has used as his text and applied admirably. But Clara seems to me too literally the 'dainty rogue in porcelain,' with a shortage of character in her girlishly pretty face. The three subjects from 'Rhoda Fleming,' however, are all brilliantly successful. Dahlia is a blonde beauty of the freshest, and caught in that moment when, before her mirror, she herself has said, 'There were times when it is quite true I thought myself a Princess.' Rhoda, if she has a fault in Mr. Bedford's hands, seems too capable of sympathy, she lacks suggestion of hardness, but certainly 'she has a steadfast look in her face.' Mrs. Lovell, fair and fascinating, is as surely the imaged figure of Meredith's imagination as Diana, with her dark hair and dignified mien is curiously suggestive both of the fact and the fiction of that character. The serene-minded Lady Dunstane companions Diana, and from 'The Amazing Marriage'

Mr. Bedford has chosen Carinthia, Livia, and Henrietta, which complete the series.

I believe that he contemplates pursuing his most praiseworthy labours, to the end that he may produce a gallery of similar miniatures representative of the leading feminine characters in all the novels. Whether this be achieved or not, Mr. Bedford has already done a very notable work, which gives him an unique place among the illustrators of Meredith.

31-3-16

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## SOME PRESS OPINIONS

ON

### George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism' by J. A. Hammerton

**Mr. W. T. Stead** in the 'Review of Reviews.'—In this handsome and copiously illustrated volume he has collected, condensed, and edited the vast mass of printed matter about Meredith which appeared in his lifetime . . . a useful compilation containing a great mass of information and of criticism that might otherwise have been forgotten.

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## PRESS OPINIONS

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## PRESS OPINIONS

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**The Globe.**—This is a book which will naturally be read by every lover of Meredith's works. It is an astonishing book, for it contains a fairly full reprint of much of the criticism, gossip, appreciation, attacks, and vindications that Meredith's writings inspired. It must have required tremendous industry to get the requisite matter together; but the author is an admirer, yet by no means a slavish admirer of Meredith, and that explains much of the reason for its appearance so soon after the death of the great novelist. The thing is certainly well done.

**The Westminster Gazette.**—Mr. J. A. Hammerton, in his 'George Meredith in Anecdote and Criticism,' has brought together a remarkable amount of information from a multitude of sources concerning the life and work of the great novelist whom we recently lost. But the book is not all quotations by any means. Mr. Hammerton links his extracts together by many passages of criticism, able and apt. If he had done no more, however, than unearthed the many comments here printed, and arranged them as he has done, in excellent order, he would have rendered a valuable service to the literary historian.

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